



## ICVA at 60 Interview Transcript

**Roger Yates**

**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 Roger Yates, Emergency Director of Plan International. Roger was on the ICVA board from 2012 to 2021 and was Chair of ICVA for his final two years.*

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

*Roger talks about the benefit of ICVA to the sector as a whole, the importance of collaboration, and how ICVA's role at the World Humanitarian Summit helped people understand and engage with the sector and took their engagement to another level.*

*Enjoy!*

**RW:** So, Roger Yeah, hi.

**RW:** I'm glad we could get you online. I can't see you, actually, I see only the letter R. It's own.Ok, good. Thanks very much. Well, no thanks. I really appreciate the chance to talk to you, but thanks for giving me a bit of time.

**RY:** No problem. Well, as I say, I apologize for being late.

**RW:** No, no, really, don't worry, I'm very happy to have this chance to talk to you. Can I just give you a very brief background as to what I'm doing?

**RY:** Yes, please.

**RW:** Ok. Ignacio, with Fiona's help, asked me to help out with the the 60 year celebration of ICVA, which will be in the next year. And the first thing I did was prepare this paper that I sent to the 60, giving a decade by decade summary of how ICVA has evolved transitioned changed over the last 50 some years. If that would be followed by a series of interviews and you're one of them, there are 15 or 16 people that I'm interviewing the way I'm

interviewing you, mainly former board members, former staff or former chairs of the board to get their perspectives on the not only on the paper, but also ICVA moving forward the next five or 10 years. So that's a very, very brief background, and I've got four questions for you. I think I've sent most of them to you so you know what they're going to be. And if you agree, I can start with my first question.

**RY** : Yes, go ahead.

**RW**: Ok, well, the first is if you've had a chance to look through the paper at all. How does the paper read and how do you what do you think about the paper? Does it cover all the main points? Are there any gaps or things that should be emphasized more in the paper itself?

**RY**: I haven't had time to look at the paper yet, so so I'm very happy. I'll take a look at it and just pin you some some messages by email on that. But I confess I just haven't got got to it.

**RW**: Ok. Just so you know what I did is I. I went through all the annual reports over the last 20 years and research papers and periodic documents that Fiona passed to me. And you'll see it when you read it, it's a decade by decade summary. What happened in the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, early 2000s, probably two or three pages per decade? That's what I organized the paper itself. When you have a chance to to look at it,

**RY**: I will look forward to that

**RW** : Ok, good. Thanks very much. So the other rights of the second question? Being part of ICVA I know you were your the last chair because I was at the last annual meeting where you were chairing the whole discussion. What made you proud of being part of ICVA over the past, I guess several years. And and why are you proud to be associated with ICVA.

**RY**: Um, there's several reasons, I mean. Yeah, I have been associated with ICVA for a long time, and I've always really liked the fact that ICVA is more focused on the benefit of the sector than the benefit of the individual member organizations. But compared to some of the if you like membership organizations around what I talk of as the infrastructure for the sector, ICVA is is very much mandate focused and drawing the members into that rather than saying we're just speaking for the benefit of members. So so that was good, that very principled, very anchored.

Secondly, I was always proud of the scale and reach and particularly the fact that you got that global membership. And I think the real efforts over the last few years to bring in more and ensure that we've got strong voices from the national organizations in different countries has been really important and from personal point of view just hearing those perspectives, you know, from board members and in some of the meetings has been really valuable, and it's helped me as somebody working for, you know, a big international organization getting that perspective and the way we were as ICVA making sure that that those voices were heard on completely equal terms, it wasn't, you know, the quality of a voice wasn't dependent on the size of the organization that it represented, which I thought was really important.

Thirdly, I think I was always very proud of the convening power of ICVA, the ability to draw in and to be involved with the very highest levels of the sector and to influence at that level and you know, the level of respect shown by, whether it's the U.N. emergency coordinator or the High Commissioner for Refugees or whoever. Really good to see that you've got a representative organization, sort of living on the back, if you like, of the diverse membership, which has got that level of respect.

And lastly, the piece that I'm always impressed with the quality of the secretariat, the depth of their technical knowledge on the issues and the ways in which things were working. You know, the great benefit of ICVA for me as a person working in a big organization is that you can buy a share in a high level specialist in effect. By sharing resources, you're getting a level of expertise and talent which, which would be, you know, almost impossible to sustain alone. So, you know, those were four.

**RW:** Oh, OK. No, they're very good and very, very comprehensive. Maybe before I get to my second question more to get your reflections on the regional offices they had, as you know, they have in Bangkok, Amman and two in Africa. Just wanted to take this chance to get your perspective. What change or benefit, I assume, is benefit you feel they've made within the global structure of ICVA.

**RY:** Yeah. And I mean, major shift and really important one. And I suppose looking at the historical reach, you know, we'd tried to get the office going in New York and hadn't really got much traction there. And so it was really representative of a very different sort of thinking. That opened up to say, you know, this strategy of closer engagement to the realities of the ground and hence better quality engagement with the organizations themselves. There's been has been really positive and you know. I think it's increased, ICVA's credibility, it's certainly improved ICVA's ability to speak to issues realistically, but it's also vastly improved -I'm normally based in Nairobi -so the engagement with ICVA there and with ICVA members. You know, has improved the organizations in the region in their ability to understand and engage with the sector. So its benefits both ends and really a game changer in how should an organization function and getting away from reinforcing the fact that it's only things that happen in Geneva which are ultimately important.

**RW:** Oh, OK. Yeah, thanks very much. Maybe two fast questions, just saying not just for a minute. It's not so much the interview, but more of my personal interest and also the paper. The first question, I went through all the documents and made the summary that you'll read, but I didn't quite get what happened in New York and why New York did not work. That's my first question. And my second is I know they moved from Senegal to Nairobi several years ago, leaving open in my mind, a real gap with Francophone Africa, all west and central Africa. And I'm wondering what your personal response is to those two issues.

**RY:** Yeah, I mean, so on the New York one. I mean, we had someone there, she was good, but being a single operator, you know, a single person operating in New York, it's a just very difficult to be effective alone in such a sort of big pond and when she left. Yeah, finding a finding a person justifying that amount of money for the relatively limited results that were possible. And I think, you know, the assumption that the political decisions were made in New York and the operational ones in Geneva was actually perhaps not, you know, not quite as true as as we'd initially thought. I think there's, you know, you had access to the political decisions, you know, travelling to New York as we sometimes did. But you didn't need to be based there, necessarily. I mean, you know, it wasn't it wasn't a bad thing, but I think you probably needed more money to make it really effective. And that just. Yeah, it wasn't well, it wasn't generating more money and it was going to cost more that was a burden we couldn't sustain.

Whereas the regions could generate money and have, you know, attracted funding and been supported to get going. On the shift from Senegal to Nairobi. Yeah. Undoubtedly there was something lost in in the move, but also something gained.

I mean, there's an awful lot more happening in terms of UN and things like that in Nairobi than in Senegal. And I think it was just a matter of how do you make limited resources stretch as far as possible. And by having someone in Addis and somebody in Nairobi sort of supporting one another, did work to an extent. I mean, we used to host as Plan, we hosted the person in West Africa. It was quite expensive. And again, you've you've got to be, somehow, those roles, the regional roles of, I think, very dependent on individuals, it's a very, very difficult role to to make an impact with such slim resources across that area. You need to be very well

connected and very active. And yet be quite selective about where you put time. So, yeah, I mean, it would be lovely to have more resources and have West Africa as well, but, it's not been not been possible. I think you might get more of a picture from the West African perspective, and I know that Marco has been travelling to West Africa a fair amount and still engaging. I think the travel constraints of COVID has obviously made that even more difficult.

**RW:** I'm sure it sounds like both of your answers resources played a role. And I guess priorities also where are the priorities for ICVA originally, when you have resource implications, you have to make choices. Frankly, that's that's what what I understand you're saying.

**RY:** Yeah. And I think, you know, we were coming towards the end of my time as chair. We were coming to the fact that, you know, if you keep stretching the resource envelope and put your ambition too high, you end up getting your, your director, your sort of prime capacity, spending more and more of their time chasing resources rather than adding value in other terms. I was getting to the view that actually you're better to have a more moderate target for resource mobilization so that it falls in relatively reliably and that allows the senior management team to deliver more from themselves. It's either that or again, you've got to make the leap and have somebody really full time on on resource mobilization, which again, is a... You've got to invest to get that, and I'm not completely sure that would necessarily work with that model, because it's the role of the director in that thing is so specific.

**RW:** Yeah, yeah, I understand that. Ok, my next question is, why do you think ICVA is important today, this very day and looking into the future, the 2030 paper and I know it was approved by your governance and how do you see ICVA today and how do you see ICVA moving into the future? Why do you think it is important?

**RY:** At heart ecause collaboration is and will be the key driver of the sector. We. If we see and I do believe that civil society is under ongoing pressure in different ways. The way in which we've got to survive and really continue as a, you know, both for effective humanitarian action but also having a pluralist approach, a diverse approach which I believe brings better results overall. Then you've got to have ways of standing together. But not of controlling. And it's that combination of sort of representatives standing together without saying, no, we're a unitary huge organization and therefore it's all the same and that for me has been really important, not least because other players look for an NGO voice. And in the past have tended to look for the big name international ones. And that changed to say, well, no, actually, the NGO sector is far bigger and more interesting and more diverse than that. Um. What's the value of ICVA in this ? So that promotion of a pluralist sector and a collaborative voice on that.

Secondly, the the sector itself is complex and helping the smaller players to navigate and understand and function successfully within it again serves serves us all. It serves the cause. And, you know, I think. You know, there is always the next wave of the U.N. restructuring or humanitarian thinking or whatever it is, and yet to be able to engage and and successfully understand that helps the smaller organizations who wouldn't otherwise be able to.

I see ICVA very successful in the future, I think I think membership of ICVA If ICVA continues to have the level of expertise and quality and access, potentially can save organizations money by doing things which as our core funds are constrained, it's more efficient to share resources to do some of these things that from a bigger organization, we've done independently in the past.

**RW:** Ok. Ok, thanks very much for that. It's really a very comprehensive reply and very, very positive, which I appreciate very much. Final question and that is more an anecdote. Do you have any anecdotes or personal reflections you'd like to share on the recording, on your, your work with ICVA. I know you have probably so many over the years, but anything personally you'd like to share kind of anecdotes.

**RY:** Well, the piece I was reflecting on this before the piece I think I would like to flag is ICVA's roll around the time of the World Humanitarian Summit. When the whole sector was in a really confused state around the run up to the summit, what was it trying to do, what was happening. It was quite chaotic from all points of view and ICVA filled the space incredibly effectively of helping people to engage. It's communication was good. It's understanding of the inside track as well as the organization's track were really important. And I saw there another level of value and engagement that I haven't seen before, but I've seen continued since.

What I felt there was that ICVA found a space for helping people understand what was going on by being well connected by being able to sort of draw in multiple strands they really helped to get well certainly ICVA members but I think the NGO sector as a whole they have a you know a powerful and coherent voice at the summit. And certainly I was finding their updates and they're really useful and it was yeah for me it was a time when they sort of took a step into that really important bit of helping people understand and engage with the sector and took it to another level.

**RW:** yeah that's true I I wasn't aware of that and I did not put that into my paper so I could even maybe ask something along those lines as to ICVA's role during the summit and probably also after the summit also.

**RY:** There was a lot going on with humanitarian reform and things and some of the papers which I mean Melissa did some really good stuff where she has an ability to simplify things without dumbing them down and it's a rare skill and she did it brilliantly on several different issues around then

**RW:** that's really a good point and maybe directly or indirectly led to a more comprehensive involvement of ICVA in the IASC. I know they have some national NGOs that are members of some of the working groups in the IASC and I'm just assuming maybe that was one of the outcomes also the closer connection to some of the main players in the IASC.

**RY:** well certainly you know ICVA was in active in the discussions on what should be the structures for the IASC and was very active in pushing to make sure that there was space for the NGO voice to be heard and then very active in in getting NGOs to be willing to put time into. So it is part and parcel of the same thing, but a really important part.

**RW:** OK that's really good reply I appreciate that very much. Any final thoughts on your side you'd like to share I'm really finished with my questions.

**RY:** I have to say I've been incredibly happy and proud to be associated with ICVA. It's been consistently you know when I've looked objectively at what are the various things that we should be members of as an international NGO, ICVA always tops the list of value for money in every sense of the word. So you know I think it's a really good organization with a very important niche and a very bright future

**RW:** I would agree. I've not been involved with ICVA that long but just in my couple of years and I'm amazed how much they can do with such a small number of staff but to be honest here in Geneva.

**RY:** yeah exactly. You know whether it's Geneva or New York or Brussels or or even Addis you get these sort of bubbles of sort of interaction where there's so many so much going on and that unless you gotten an insider helping you it's very difficult to keep track and know what's there once the underlying politics behind things and where things are worth pushing or where not

**RW:** Oh yeah I agree with you OK well I'm glad we could reconnect those last couple of minutes I appreciate that alright too

**RY:** No problem at all

**RW:** Thanks very much I appreciate your time

**RY:** Thanks. Bye

*This conversation between Roger Yates 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).*