



ICVA at 60 Interview Transcript

Tom Getman

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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 Tom Getman, who was Chair of ICVA from 2006-2009

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

<https://www.icvanetwork.org/resource/icva-at-60-1962-2022-collaborating-for-effective-humanitarian-action/>

Tom talks about his time as Chair of ICVA, about the practice and power of partnership, and the role of ICVA in the selection of the High Commissioner for UNHCR

Enjoy.

RW: Hello, Tom.

TW: Robert, hello to you. What a treat.

RW: And you can you can you see me OK?

TG: Yeah, just fine. Perfect.

RW: Oh, good.

TG: Yeah, yeah. Well, tell me how you got involved in this ICVA project and what a delightful. Project, it is, I guess, exciting you're calling us all together for the 60th anniversary, it'd be fun to be there.

RW: What I'm involved in is one of the lead up to the celebration. The paper that I sent to you, that's ICVA at 60 paper, and I'm doing about 15 interviews of former board members, former staff, former

chairs of the board, like you were and gathering information. So it's one of the preliminary activities that I'm involved them just to help out a little bit.

TG: Yeah, well, I'm willing to answer any questions you have.

RW: Yeah, OK, I have four I've sent you the ones that I have actually, but first, maybe any reflections at all on the paper. Any any gaps or things that should be emphasized more or ideas you have on the paper itself?

TG: Well, I was very grateful to get the rundown of the founder and the different chairs and directors. And it made me very aware of why it was a capstone of my career, my 25 year humanitarian career to be involved so intimately with ICVA. I have to say that maybe you didn't know this, I'm sure we talked about it at some point, but I continued my work, because I had the blessing of being elected Chair. I got to pick a lot of the fruit that other people had planted and nurtured, and the particular highlight that kept me working for two and a half extra years beyond my retirement age was the privilege that was just sort of a subtext of the paper. The partnership between ICVA and OCHA is IASC, the Interagency Standing Committee. That privilege of meeting twice a year with the heads of all the U.N. humanitarian agencies was frosting on the cake for me. I loved it. And becoming personal friends with those people was just an amazing, edifying experience, and I really was grateful for the the way to end my career that way. And the names are a veritable list of the greats in the humanitarian organizations of the UN.

And only recently did I realize Jan England's very pivotal role when he was deputy foreign minister in Norway. In the Oslo, the pre Oslo Accords. The pre Oslo Accords were more important than Oslo itself, which became a burden for everybody and undermined Palestinian liberation. But Jan England's role he never talked about when we were together, either personally or in the IASC. He was a very humble man who had great roles to play in many, many different ways, and that's just one illustratio.

The other highlight was being a part of the interview team for the then emerging soon to be picked High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres, who also also became a personal friend. And now, of course, we can take great pride in helping to nurture him so that he could be the great secretary general that he ism and at such and such a time as this. I loved reading the paper, and I and I was reminded happily that that our friend Elizabeth preceded me as chair.

And she particularly Elizabeth Ferris, Beth, She was one that did so so much pivotal work that resulted in the cluster program, the the program for accountability, particularly around sexual issues and so on. I've always been so grateful, but Bob and I've said this to people that it was the highlight of my career. But to read that paper just underscored the amazing, amazing partnership that developed with the U.N. and has continued. I understand now from other people who have followed us, like Jane Backhurst, who is a former colleague as well, that things were harvested and then replanted and reconfigured in that period of the first 10 years of the new millennium, but we just couldn't have imagined how critical they were. And I'm so proud of the people who have followed suit since. It's been really fun to continue to receive the regular newsletters and reports for ICVA. I'm grateful that those of us that used to be involved are still included in the mailings.

RW : Oh, that's really good. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, thanks, it's a very positive assessment that you just gave me, which I really do appreciate. My next question is similar to the first one. Maybe a little more precise. When you were a part of ICVA, when you were Chair, I guess what made you proud of being there at ICVA? What gave you pride or the greatest satisfaction or reward, basically?

TG: Well, some of it I've already mentioned the relationship with with Antonio Guterres, relationship with Sergio Vieira de Mello. I didn't mention that, but Sergio also was such a nurturer. He, you know, he didn't preach the word he lived, the word, so to speak. And we all heard that at his memorial services. He never

would depart our company. He would never end a meeting. He would never say goodbye to a friend without saying be a presence and be it in the presence of others. How can you put it into a nutshell better than that? We have to illustrate what we are preaching, not beat people over the head with it. And we have to do it in the company of others. We have to be partners, not live in silos. And what made me so proud was that not only World Vision, but other agencies really began to practice that when when the clusters were formed. Haiti is a good illustration. We we got lined up with the agencies that we were supposed to be closest to and had the phone numbers for when the balloons went up, when there is a crisis, we knew who to call first thing. World Vision with World Food Program, Medecins Sans Frontieres with World Health Organization, et cetera, et cetera.

And what happened was people learn to promote others rather than just themselves. And I think we hammered that home on our cluster trips. I think of particularly some of the wonderful people that went on those teams, Jamie McGoldrick, for one who I've had reason to be in touch with recently because he had been the the res rep in Palestine. And to just see the quality of the people that were on those teams when we went to Haiti, when we went to Senegal, when we went to South Africa, when we went to Sudan, when we went to even to Sri Lanka after the tsunami. And how we could illustrate by our working together as U.N. people and as NGO people of how positive it is, how enhancing it is to be in these productive clusters. I was told at the time of the Haiti earthquake that it's estimated that 300,000 lives were saved because of the clusters, because of each of the NGOs calling, things were in disarray while the Earth was still shaking while the hurricane was still blowing. The NGO people right away knew who to call and did call the U.N. people and started planning for recovery. It's an amazing story. It's an amazing story. You may remember Helen, Bill Abongs daughter ?

RW: Well, yeah, yeah, for sure.

TG: Yeah, yeah. She was the community affairs person for the U.N. in Haiti when we went, when Jamie and I went to do the workshops with the Haiti NGOs and the Haiti civil servants. And she was a great counselor to us, but she also sort of set the stage for our workshops. And it was such a tragedy when she was lost the way she was in that earthquake.

But her work went on and our work went on. It was one more illustration of how people being willing to be humble and not self-promoting or organizational promoting. But in fact, the saving of many lives and relieving of terrible, terrible suffering. That's my proudest my proudest moment. And my my gratitude for Antonio and Sergio and the Red Cross executives, and particularly for Jan, Jan Egeland was such a good facilitator of that and affirming the fact that the NGOs had as much a role to play as OCHA or UNHCR.

RW: Ok. Very good to hear.

TG: Be a presence and being in the presence of others. That's the nutshell.

RW: Yeah. Well, partnership and coordination, as you know, is probably the main role or one of the main roles of ICVA so happy to hear say that

TG: [Yeah, accountability partnership is the humanitarian accountability. The HAP was such an important thing during our period and and yeah, and ED Shenckenberg has to have a lot of credit for his persistence and his long service. It was it was great fun working with him.

RW: Yeah, he's on my list of people to be interviewed also. And Beth Ferris also.

TG: Oh Beth's great

RW: People that you're talking about. The next question is it's on the the list of the ones sent to you. Why do you think ICVA is important today, because it's been a while since you've been there, you served, what, 2006, 2009? Something like that?

TG: I was there from 2006 to 2009. Yeah, I think you'll have to find this out from Beth, but I think Beth moved to another responsibility and so maybe left. Maybe left six months or so early, and so we went through a bit of a crisis in deciding who on the board should be the chair, and this is something too that you all need to note because she had represented a Christian agency and I was representing a Christian agency. There was some hesitation about having another American, another person from a faith based agency in the North take over. And so it was quite a debate and and there was also, as you would understand, concern about World Vision because you may recall that World Vision was wrongly kicked out of Sudan in the late 1990's, along with Dan Church Aid, Norwegian, the faith agency, NCA, and Lutheran World Federation, we were all kicked out wrongly accused of doing evangelism. And of course, it's part of the principles, humanitarian principles that whatever your faith is, you don't push it on people, you don't make rice Christians or. People who have no faith forced into some sort of religious structure.

And the Adventists are really good about keeping that principle. But anyway, we were wrongly accused and we had to work for years to get our protocols back. And thankfully, part of my role in ICVA helped me to develop a relationship with the Sudan ambassador who became the humanitarian director in the government of Sudan and our protocol back, but the other protocols back. And an apology for misjudging.

But the thing that made me so aware. Robert, of what we are responsible to do is to recognize the depth and the quality of other people's religious convictions. And what happened in the debate in the board, this was this is real back channel stuff, this was off the record for sure. But but especially the the guys from the Scandinavian countries and ladies really had drawn questions about agencies that have had a record in the past of being maybe a little more engaged for faith reasons than for humanitarian reasons. Not that guys like you and me, don't mix them, but not in an inappropriate way. And so we had strong opposition to my becoming chair, frankly and. And it was the Muslim people on the board, this was what made me so grateful. It was Muslim people who, as you and I know, are sometimes better followers of Jesus than than are our Christian counterparts. They pray better. They keep, the spiritual principals better than a lot of our Christian fellows who have a sense of entitlement. And so they really broke it all down to say, you know, we want people not that the others who were on the slate didn't practice this to - action more than words. But they said, you know, we want somebody who who believes something and practises it. And and then we all sort of took a deep breath, too, because I was having the same hesitation. And we really work together in ways that was so edifying. I'll tell you my visits in Africa with our Muslim counterparts, Islamic counterparts. Our work in Malaysia and in Sri Lanka with our Islamic counterparts was, I think, one of the things that launched our more balanced isn't a good word, especially for somebody that works in the Middle East. But it helped us come into a new era in giving equal credit for the southern NGOs and the eastern NGOs. And now, of course, they participate more thoroughly in the board memberships and even the chairmanships. So those those are the things that really made my heart sing when when we were working in that three or four years.

RW: Oh yeah, yeah. But did you feel that Tom, it came through in my paper, actually, and also in talking to Ignacio that it's only been recently that the chairs of the board have not been either European or North American? No, it's only in the past five or six years. So which means it means for decades, it was pretty much pretty much a white only club. European North American, right? But did you feel that when you felt that when you were there too?

TG: Oh, absolutely. And that's why we push so hard. I use the leverage that they assumed I wouldn't have or use as a person from a more evangelical organization to push for Muslim leadership. Oh yeah. And it came

through in our annual meetings and you mentioned in the paper that there was growing appreciation in this millennium for what people of other faiths, people of other experiences bring to the table.

RW: Yeah. And other parts of the world, yeah, exactly. So of course, the so called southern NGOs do. Yeah, yeah.

TG: It made me less evangelical and more ecumenical or one thing, and I think that's true with almost everybody that was intimately involved with ICVA and OCHA. And you realize the power of partnership if we see each other on an equal footing.

RW: Yeah, yeah. Still on that question to Tom, looking more to the future and also the future of ICVA, how do you see? If you could almost prognosticate the future, how would you see ICVA evolving or changing or moving into the future compared to where they have been and where they are now? What is your personal view on that? Just curious.

TG: Well, I'm not not to get into ego battles with our counterparts in the U.N., but I think. What will happen because of the appreciation and the way partnerships and clusters have been developed and for the way that good things have happened? Here's here's another illustration. The real struggle about partnership with the military. Whoa, has that been a struggle? And and I think. We will. Particularly because of the war history of the last 15 years, 20 years. We're going to stake our claims for resources, for involvement, for appreciation separate from the military.

I'll tell you a personal story after I define this a little further, but that's going to that's going to grow in appreciation and it's going to result in NGOs receiving more of the credit and resources for the work of the partnerships than I think we've had in the past. Although we had a real growth surge in this century that has held pretty steady. I think that that's the other thing I would prognosticate that will increase. There won't be the dips and necessary cuts in staff, and there's going to be more public recognition from outstanding reporters like Lyse Doucet and David Ignatius and people like that because when you talk to them, they tell us they are aware of what an increasingly important role in terms of the ethics and the operation of the humanitarian field. I just think that is is going to be sort of the afterburner effect of what's going on in the first 20 years of the this century with ICVA and the other partner agencies, not just ICVA, but Interaction. And I've forgotten what the European. Has it been folded into ICVA the one that was centered in Brussels?

RW: One, call it Voice, they used to be one, probably so as a Voice, I believe it is still there.

TG: Yeah. And then there are the the the coordinating committees in Africa and in Asia. And I have. If not presence of ICVA as least influence by ICVA or partnership with ICVA.

RW: Yeah, I'm surprised, Tom, by what you say about the future. I'm pleasantly surprised. Hope it works about the growth of NGOs and public recognition because just going through the pandemic in the last 15, 16 months, a lot of agencies have had to downsize and not really increase, losing staff or fewer resources coming into the NGOs and the U.N. system also, for that matter. So it sounds like you're more optimistic than what than what I've been hearing, at least over here.

TG: Well, let me tell you one positive thing here. That's a sign of it. I'm a part of a little committee that has grown out of the Biden faith and community engagement board. Do you know about that? It's the old, it's the old. It's an expansion of points of light that the Bush presidents had what was it called another, the State Department has had in partnership with the White House these little offices where they engaged people of not only Christian faith, but Jewish people and Muslim people, in particular, and Buddhists to a lesser degree, to build partnerships, not just for political and especially not for political influence, but for gathering people

together for times like this. And a UNWRA has been up in lights because UNWRA is the one big agency that partners with Mercy Corps, who partners with UNWRA in Gaza. So. So in our discussions with State Department and USAID to get the funding back, that Trump cut. And that was such a hit, not only for the Middle East, but other places as well. People like Sean Carroll are the real heroes and are being acknowledged by the system, which is the first step to being acknowledged by the media. The same is true with World Food Program. Whenever David would speak about. But forgotten his last name, what's the former congressman that is the head of World Food Program?

RW: Yeah, I forgot. I'm not sure.

TG: Anyway, whenever he speaks, he talks about the NGOs. It's easy. It's a very humble thing for him to do because he is the man in charge and he's a very, very vociferous representative of the U.N. and World Food Program directly, but he never has a moment on television or in the press that he doesn't acknowledge the NGOs that he's partnering with. That's terrific. And even when we were working so closely with the heads of the humanitarian agencies in the IASC, that didn't often happen, sometimes with the Red Cross people. But I don't remember ever. Even Antonio, talking that much about the NGOs and I think the more engaged we are and it looks from your paper, the IASC is continuing with representation

RW: With a larger role from ICVA also. That's it. And NGO members of being part of that committees.

TG: Having watched the humanitarian world for 40 years, first in government and then as a director of operations and as a representative of the NGOs at the U.N.. This is this is something new, and I think it's because of people's desperation of how severe the problems are. I mean, we always used to say that there were the largest number of refugees since World War Two in the early part of this century. Yeah. And now there are 25 million more than there were that when we were referencing them at the beginning of this 20 year period.

So, you know, it's it's more essential. To practice partnership, it's more essential not only to practice it, but to honor it and to extol it and to speak to it. And I think that's happening more and more with people like World Food Program and the UNHCR. Certainly with UNWRA.

RW: Oh yeah, that's good. My last question is a very simple question, Tom, and that is, is there one anecdote or one memory, one specific memory you have of some experience you'd like to share kind of a sound bite or something, maybe more positive? What already have been quite positive, but just a little anecdote about your own experience that you'd like to share that might go into this eventual recording.

TG: I'll never forget. I could even take you to the place where Ed and another staff person and I went to interview Antonio Guterres. When just I think it was the first time ICVA had a role in choosing the head of UNHCR. There had been, you know, all these ethics problems and so on in the 20 years running up to Antonio. Yeah, and it was such a stirring experience to be sitting in a garden north of the city, I wish I could remember the name of the town where. But. Look, just to be with that man and be overwhelmed by the fact that this is the person and we're having a role to play in making sure he's promoted properly. Because there were lots of pressures and lots of competition for people to be promoting their person. And that was one of the most stirring things that I had happen.

And the other was being in Haiti with Jamie McGoldrick and others. And it's like it was yesterday being in that room with the heads of agencies and civil society leaders and seeing the hunger that people had to not be alone because it was like they knew. A terrible thing was about to happen. Just because of the atmospherics of Haiti and tragedy on tragedy in that place and so hungry for the affirmation, the tools and the promise that we would be there for them when when the balloon did go up, when a tragedy did happen

RW: And then needed even more these days, that's for sure

TG : Exactly right. Exactly right. So it's very much in my head reading the paper even this morning about the tragedy of not only the leadership failure, but the outside messing with their system and the hunger the actual physical hunger, what is had 60 percent of people are now food insecure?

So I pray, I really do pray that what we did in those meetings, those cluster meetings in. 2006, 2007 was one of the first models that the first training session that we did. We hope that it has continued because, boy, they need it now more than ever. And I noticed that the U.N. is going back in. But you just pray that not American military that goes in.

RW: And, yeah, a terrible situation right now, obviously. I was there back in that one, was it when I worked for Church World Service in 79, 80, 81 and I'm not sure it's really changed or improved that much over the last 40 years.

TG: But it's been a place sort of a set piece for us to be serious about doing it in other places that may not be as at risk. But. I mean, you think of what happened with the tsunami and the same experience we had in Haiti, we had in Vietnam and we had in Sri Lanka.

RW: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Any final thoughts from your side that you'd like to share? I really appreciate all the things that you told me already.

TG : ICVA and OCHA were the highlights of my career

The one thing that our work does is make us humble, we sure operate out of compassionate hearts. And sometimes over operate out of compassionate hearts and the prophetic instructions we get about caring for the poor and the oppressed, whether it's Luke 5, or Matthew 25, or the prophets, because we have to do it. But there are wise There are wise ways to do it. And I think we did it wiser in ICVA since than I did in the 80s.

I'm so happy to see you too. You, sir. Yes.

RW: You. Oh, we can get together one of these days. I'm not sure. Do you ever get to Europe or less?

TG: Well, until COVID, we were coming every year for two or three months. Thanks for this privilege.

RW : Thanks Tom really appreciate it.

This conversation between Tom Getman 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).