



A GLOBAL NGO NETWORK
FOR PRINCIPLED AND EFFECTIVE
HUMANITARIAN ACTION

CASE STUDY

ICVA Members Influence UNICEF's Programme Cooperation Agreement

2024

Context

ICVA's Humanitarian Finance workstream advocates to ensure humanitarian financing meets the needs of populations affected by crises, whilst ensuring better access to quality humanitarian funding for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).¹ Humanitarian action resourcing is a major preoccupation of ICVA members, appearing in fourth place of trends that will shape the humanitarian landscape in 2030 based on ICVA's 2030-member survey results.²

The overarching aim of ICVA's humanitarian finance work is to ensure financing of humanitarian action meets the needs of populations affected by crises while ensuring adequate NGO access to principled, quality funding. One objective is for ICVA to contribute to increased efficiency within the humanitarian system to improve the effectiveness of funding. Previous successes in this strategic area include contributions to harmonised NGO narrative reporting as part of the Grand Bargain initiative.³ Since 2021, ICVA has been working with its members on harmonisation and simplification of United Nations' (UN) Partnership Agreements. Activities have included updating the 2019 Oxfam-led analysis of UN Partnership Agreements and connecting members with UN agencies to engage in harmonisation and simplification discussions. This work has been ongoing since then.⁴

At the beginning of 2023, as part of ICVA's Humanitarian Financing Working Group (HFWG), several members raised concerns regarding the lack of communication from the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) on the launch of the revised Programme Cooperation Agreement (PCA), its roll out timeline and locations, and the content of the revised PCA and its General Terms and Conditions. ICVA and its Working Group members prioritised addressing these concerns, initiating focused efforts in this area.

What ICVA and NGOs did

UNICEF's PCA serves as a legally binding agreement outlining terms and conditions for cooperation between Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and UNICEF. Comprising the PCA itself, along with its General Terms and Conditions and any associated programme document⁵, this agreement was last revised in 2019, a process that ICVA's former Head of Humanitarian Financing noted occurred "*without partner consultation*", prompting ICVA and the HFWG to ensure NGOs could engage with UNICEF prior to committing to its revised terms.

Between February and May 2023, ICVA and Working Group members used their standing meetings and regular exchanges to scrutinise the revised PCA and General Terms and Conditions, aiming to identify critical content deemed unacceptable, agree on alternative content acceptable to all, and negotiate PCA amendments with UNICEF. Feedback from eight international NGO ICVA members highlighted two contentious areas: revisions to the definition and coverage of support costs, and UNICEF's authority to request the replacement of NGO staff without justification in case of allegations of safeguarding violations.

With regards to support costs, while additional coverage for capacity strengthening activities were welcomed, significant concerns arose over changes to the definition and coverage of these costs.

¹ See ICVA's 2030 Strategy https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2021/07/ICVA2030_Strategy_ENGLISH.pdf

² From internal document

³ See ICVA's 2019-2021 Impact Study, page 28 <https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2022/03/Full-report-2019-2021-ICVA-Impact-Study-March-2022.pdf>

⁴ See ICVA's 2019-2021 Impact Study, page 27 <https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2022/03/Full-report-2019-2021-ICVA-Impact-Study-March-2022.pdf>

⁵ For more information, see <https://supportagency.unpartnerportal.org/hc/en-us/categories/360000084153-UNICEF-Partnership-Guidelines>

The 2019 PCA identified them as “headquarter support costs” and defined them as “those costs incurred by the [International Partner] which cannot be unequivocally attributed to a specific activity implemented by the [International Partner] in accordance with this Agreement”.⁶ The 2023 revised PCA left out headquarter support costs and only referred to “support costs for organisational capacity”, defining them as “those costs incurred by the Partner for organisational capacity strengthening and/or capacity maintenance which cannot be unequivocally attributed to a specific activity implemented by the Partner in accordance with this Agreement”. The implication of this change was significant for NGOs, as an ICVA member expressed:

“The provision of Indirect Cost Recovery (ICR) is necessary to help organisations support their headquarter costs and to maintain efficiency in their organisational systems. The provision of ICR gives NGOs the opportunity to invest flexibly in their respective needs including capacity strengthening. The introduction of this clause limits the ability of NGOs to flexibly invest in their organisations as per their need”. **ICVA member**

Furthermore, the 2023 revision entitled UNICEF authority to request staff replacement without obligation to justify or explain: “at any time during the term of the Agreement, UNICEF can make a written request that the Partner replace one of more of the assigned employees [...] or other subcontractors’ personnel” in case of safeguarding concerns. This clause went against some NGOs’ Human Resources Policy and gave UNICEF authority to decide upon staff replacement without an obligation to justify or explain this request, undermining the independence of NGOs.

Equipped with HFWG members’ robust arguments on the impacts of these changes on NGOs’ independence and ability to remain highly relevant, efficient, and innovative, ICVA engaged in discussions with UNICEF counterparts from the Office of the Executive Director, Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring, and Division of Public Partnerships to share NGO concerns and negotiate amendments to the PCA. A document highlighting top concerns and potential adjustments was shared with UNICEF, forming the basis for the initial review and subsequent discussions. Between 30 March and 3 May, ICVA and UNICEF engaged in three rounds of discussions on proposed adjustments, involving back and forth exchanges with HFWG members and UNICEF’s relevant stakeholders, including legal and safeguarding staff, to gather updated feedback.

Results and impact

In May 2023, UNICEF agreed to significant amendments to the PCA following the ICVA-led, member-driven advocacy, resulting in the publication of a revised 2023 PCA.⁷ Critical amendments obtained by the HFWG focus included a reviewed definition of support costs for organisational capacity to include headquarter support costs, and added text to suspension and termination conditions clarifying that UNICEF could make a written request for Partners to replace staff or subcontractors’ personnel only “with a clear rationale and justification” in case of allegations of safeguarding violations. UNICEF would also offer support to the Partner in finding suitable replacement.

These amendments not only benefit ICVA members, but the entire NGO community partnering with UNICEF, demonstrating ICVA’s capacity to influence more equitable humanitarian partnerships and

⁶ See <https://supportcso.unpartnerportal.org/hc/en-us/articles/360004492853--2019-Partnership-Agreement-Templates-Archived->

⁷ See <https://supportagency.unpartnerportal.org/hc/en-us/articles/9340228460951-PCA-Template>

drive progressive transformation within the humanitarian system using the collective voice of its members.

The successful consultation process represents another significant achievement, showcasing willingness from all parties to understand each other's perspectives and limitations to reach a mutually beneficial outcome for all. Previous attempts by ICVA and its members to influence UNICEF strategies and policies had failed to address issues of concern, leading to similar concerns surfacing again in the 2023 PCA.⁸ But this time, they were either addressed or their intent was explained by UNICEF so NGOs could better understand its positioning. UNICEF commended ICVA for its initiative and leadership in the consultation process, highlighting the exercise as worthwhile⁹.

Lessons learned

Thanks to its participation in major global humanitarian fora, such as the Grand Bargain Facilitation Group in 2022 and 2023¹⁰, and established relationships with key stakeholders such as States, donors, and UN agencies, ICVA is well positioned to advocate quickly and effectively for NGO interests when swift action is needed. Furthermore, ICVA's Working Group structures allow it to stay on top of humanitarian financing and partnerships developments amongst other focus areas, ensuring the timely identification and resolution of significant issues.

The success of the UNICEF PCA advocacy initiative is strongly related to the expertise, experience, and unified positioning of ICVA's HFWG members, who provided specific details into how the revised PCA could affect NGO integrity, independence, and ability to remain relevant, effective, and innovative. They also clearly communicated non-negotiable areas within the PCA. Strong arguments, resolve, and a unified voice conveyed a strong message to UNICEF, emphasising the need for meaningful consultation and ensuring NGO interests are adequately represented in partnership agreements.

⁸ From internal document

⁹ From internal communication

¹⁰ See ICVA's Briefing Paper on the [Grand Bargain 2.0 Explained](#), page 24.



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