CASE STUDY #2

UNHCR – NGO Consultations

How ICVA’s leadership ensures meaningful consultations between the UNHCR and NGOs

Overview

The UNHCR Annual NGO Consultation, co-organised by UNHCR and ICVA, is a major event that provides an important forum for debate and dialogue on global and regional themes and an opportunity to explore collaboration on advocacy and operational issues. Since its inception more than 30 years ago, the event has grown to more than 500 participants and has become one of the best networking opportunities for humanitarian professionals working in the field of Forced Displacement. However, this growth has created challenges in meeting ICVA’s main objective: to ensure there is a safe forum/space for direct exchange between NGOs and UNHCR on issues of common concern, particularly partnership dynamics; operational challenges and achievements; policy developments related to refugees, IDPs and stateless persons. In recent years, ICVA and UNHCR have taken steps to adapt the consultation and contemplate broader reforms.

Details

ICVA is co-organiser of the event with UNHCR Partnership and Coordination Service (PCS), meaning it cooperates with UNHCR in steering the planning and organisation of the consultation. ICVA and PCS carry out a preliminary consultation process to poll NGOs and UNHCR about the theme to be addressed at the next consultations; asking their suggestions in terms of sessions/workshops to be included on the agenda; asking NGOs to collaborate with UNHCR focal points on organising the sessions/workshops that have been selected. Once the focal points have been appointed, ICVA and PCS oversee the work, making sure general directions and deadlines are respected. This consultative approach is valued but also very time consuming and depends on NGOs’ willingness to contribute time and resources. During the event, ICVA also provides support to the NGO Rapporteur to develop the closing speech, draft the report, and present the report at UNHCR’s Executive Committee. While the reports do collect many recommendations there does not seem to be a comprehensive follow-up and monitoring of the recommendations by ICVA or UNHCR.

The main value, as reported by participants, is the opportunity to network and exchange with peers and with UNHCR. It is also seen as a good moment for NGOs to hold bilateral meetings with their UNHCR counterparts or with UNHCR senior management, thus sometimes helping unlock issues or generate collaborative work at regional/national level. At the same time, there has been some controversy that the consultation is morphing into a multi-stakeholder conference as participation in the consultation have included some actors beyond the NGO community (e.g. academics, individual refugees and sometimes other UN Agencies). Some fear this is diluting the purpose of the event towards being a general sharing and less a meaningful ‘consultation’.

In 2017, ICVA supported UNHCR in piloting a new format for the annual consultations, aiming to make the discussion sessions more participatory and more representative of the diversity of NGOs in attendance, through organising breakout sessions and involving “pairs” of INGOs and NNGOs to widen the reach of the sessions. In addition, ICVA facilitated or co-facilitated preparation sessions via a webinar and online meetings to streamline the process. In 2018 an innovation award was introduced and the meeting featured a BBC ‘Hard Talk’ journalist which helped to sharpen discussions at the podium.

Looking ahead there is an ongoing reflection on how to reform the Annual Consultations as UNHCR is examining how to align the consultations with their internal reform; for example, by reducing consultations at Geneva level and increasing consultations at regional levels. ICVA and UNHCR will need to continue to partner together to refine the approach to truly get what is needed from the consultation. It must be more than just an excellent networking opportunity, offering an environment for meaningful exchange on challenges and ideas between NGOs and UNHCR as equal partners.