A short overview of the UNHCR and IOM consultations with NGOs organized with ICVA

The UNHCR-NGO Annual Consultations started many years ago, while ICVA became formally involved only later on. Currently the consultation consists of a three-day meeting organised yearly in Geneva with approximately 500 participants. Though formally and historically this is conceptualized as a consultation “with NGOs” and there are a number of criteria for registration, the meeting has diverted from this original concept to sometimes include other types of participants (media, academics, refugees, etc.). Some NGOs are driving such an evolution while others consider this negatively impacts the discussion space. So far, member states are not included to ensure a safe space is preserved for UNHCR-NGO discussions.

The selection of the themes and the development of the agenda is done in a very participatory way (i.e. consulting NGOs through emails, meetings and then tasking UNHCR and NGO focal points to work together in organizing the sessions). The down side of this participatory approach is that the preparation process is long, many actors are involved in parts of it and not all of them have the needed resources and time required for a qualitative engagement. A stronger overall coordination from CSOs side, could also avoid some issues being identified only on last minute.

The outcome of the meeting is a report, which is formally written by an NGO appointed as rapporteur of the event. The report if presented to ExCom and used in the next yearly consultation to remind of previous discussions. So far, the report therefore represents only the NGO perspective on the consultations.

Because of the large number of participants and their diversity, it is challenging to come up with clear objectives that are program oriented and to use the consultation as a tool for changes in program collaboration. Many participants, including UNHCR divisions consider it more as visibility event and are even active in twitting about it.

In view of the UNHCR regionalisation process, changes in the format of the consultation are being discussed and the process might shift to the regional level, with the idea of keeping a smaller meeting yearly in Geneva. There are also discussions to have as an outcome of the meeting agreement on few recommendations, on which progress can be followed up. This would however require a certain commitment by the participants on behalf of their agencies, which may require changes in the criteria of participation. No decisions have been taken yet.

It is also to be noted that in addition to this big consultation, specific retreats are organised by specific UNHCR Units, where they discuss and plan with a much smaller number of NGO partners upcoming work (i.e. on statelessness) and are as such more program directed.

More information on the UNHCR-NGOs consultations including concept notes, programs, list of participants and reports of the yearly meetings can be found at: https://www.unhcr.org/annual-consultations-ngo.html

The IOM-NGO Humanitarian Consultations started in 2015 and were supposed to be a one-off event but have continued every year since then. In addition, IOM has also an annual consultation with a broader group of NGOs than the humanitarian ones (in which ICVA is involved only as participant). The format of the humanitarian consultation is a one-day yearly meeting with approximately 70-100 participants. The yearly meeting takes place one year in Geneva and the next year, in one of the regions, with rotation among them. The idea is to give a specific focus on one regional context in addition to the global overview.
Some joint thinking is done by IOM and ICVA in selecting the participants and IOM involves also their regional and country offices, especially when the meeting takes place in one of the regions. Participation is limited to NGOs and this makes it easier to focus the discussion on program. The outcome of the process is also a report, which is drafted by IOM and commented on by ICVA. More information on the IOM-NGO humanitarian consultations are available at: https://www.iom.int/iom-ngo-humanitarian-consultations-

Few lessons learnt from both consultations:
- Be clear on the objectives of the consultations;
- Decide carefully who participates based on the objectives;
- Be clear on division of tasks and responsibilities among organizers from the beginning;
- Don’t underestimate the workload and resources (there is quite a logistics behind such meetings)
- Keep it simple; start by testing the idea and evolve in ambitions progressively