MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES

MSF’S OVERALL PURPOSE

The overall purpose of MSF is to preserve life and alleviate suffering while protecting human dignity and seeking to restore the ability of people to make their own decisions.

* This purpose is to be accomplished through the provision of medical aid and a personal commitment to act as witness to events surrounding populations in danger.
* This work is essentially performed in periods of crisis, when a situation is no longer held in balance and the very survival of a population may be threatened.
* The underlying basis for realising its objectives is respect for medical ethics, humanistic ideals, human rights and international humanitarian law.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

A. Two Forms of Action

Two inseparable elements are combined in MSF’s work: medical aid and witnessing (témoignage), both of which imply that MSF is present with those in danger and that they are the focus of its work. These two elements are twinned together both in the interest of the victims and in order to achieve our overall objective. MSF must be meticulous in providing an efficient presence, demonstrating competence and ensuring a real impact on the situation, and thereby assuring its legitimacy and credibility.

1) Medical aid covers medical care in any and all of its forms, but refers essentially to the provision of curative and preventive care. As our prime objective is to work towards the survival of populations in danger, MSF may be required to provide more than medical assistance in some situations (water, sanitation, food and shelter). In other situations, the work remains essentially medical.

2) Witnessing (témoignage) consists of:
- the presence of volunteers among people in danger, motivated by concern for the fate of fellow human beings and a willingness to be at their side and to listen to them, as well as to carry out medical work among them, and
- reporting on the situation and on the fate of these people, which is seen as a duty. Where MSF is present as a witness to large-scale human rights violations, such as forced population displacements, sending refugees back from their country of refuge (refoulement), genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, then MSF may ultimately be forced to make public denunciations.

It may happen in exceptional cases and in the best interests of the victims of such human rights abuses that MSF will bring assistance but will not speak out publicly. The opposite case may also occur when the organisation considers that humanitarian aid is being used against the victims’ best interests and an exceptional decision is taken only to denounce and not to aid.
B. MSF’s responsibilities

Faced with a crisis situation, we have a duty to apply the maximum resources available on their behalf. However, such resources are necessarily limited and must be put to the best possible use. It is essential to carry out an ongoing evaluation and monitoring in order to improve both the quality and the effectiveness of an intervention and to ensure that nothing that MSF does could in any way put the population at risk. All this implies that MSF is fully accountable for its actions in regard to the target population, donors and public opinion.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The following principles are at the heart of the MSF movement and lie behind all the work carried out by the organisation.

1. INDEPENDENCE

* MSF’s independence is, above all, an independence of spirit that has its roots in an independent judgement and a critical attitude towards the way in which humanitarian interventions are both made use of and abused.

* An independent spirit is a prerequisite for independent action, ensuring a free choice in regard to where and how to intervene, when to start an operation and when to end it.

* This operational independence implies an independent organisation. MSF refuses to intervene under pressure from any authority, whether de jure or de facto, or to be manipulated into seeming either to support any such body or to act as an alibi for any of them. MSF therefore maintains the strictest independence from any organisation or de facto authority (be it political, religious, economic, financial or other). However, the search for independent financing must respect certain ethical safeguards and the values held by the MSF movement.

* This overall independence must be respected by each member of MSF, who must at all times refrain from linking the organisation with their own political and other affiliations.

2. IMPARTIALITY AND NEUTRALITY

* Impartiality is at the root of all MSF’s work, dependent on operational independence and presuming that the necessary conditions are present. This impartiality is demonstrated by:
  - a refusal to practise any form of discrimination based on race, religion, politics or any other affiliation, and
  - making it a priority to apportion aid only on the basis of the degree of need so that we bring assistance into line with the amount of suffering.

* MSF adheres to the principle of neutrality which means that the organisation does not take part in conflicts.
3. MEDICAL ETHICS AND RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

* MSF’s work is founded on the principles of medical ethics, specifically acknowledging that:
  - no one may be punished for carrying out medical work in conformity with such ethical principles, no matter the circumstances nor the beneficiaries of such action,
  - no one carrying out medical work may be forced to commit acts or behave in any way contrary to these ethical principles or to international law,
  - medical workers may not refuse to perform such actions as are required by the above.

* MSF calls for respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, particularly in regard to:
  - the duty to respect the fundamental liberty of each individual, including their physical and mental integrity, demonstrated by freedom of thought, expression and movement, etc. (as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), and
  - the right of victims to receive assistance and the right of humanitarian organisations to provide assistance, which requires that they are free to assess requirements, have free access to the victims and retain control of aid distributions, and that they are accorded immunity by all concerned.

4. A VOLUNTARY ORGANISATION AND AN ASSOCIATIVE (CO-OPERATIVE) MOVEMENT

* A voluntary organisation

MSF is an association based on voluntary service, a notion that encompasses four elements.
  - Commitment towards populations in danger and towards the ideals and principles of MSF’s work.
  - Commitment to the MSF movement, which implies both commitment as an individual to a particular mission and an active interest in defining the identity of the movement, joining in debates on its underlying principles and the directions it is taking.
  - A reliance on each volunteer accepting his/her individual responsibility in order that MSF can exercise its overall responsibility.
  - The willingness of individuals to work as volunteers ensures that MSF is able to remain a non-profit-making organisation.

MSF is constantly looking for new volunteers as they help it to remain an open-minded organisation, submitting and reacting to their critical examination, and thereby encouraging spontaneity. Remaining a voluntary organisation is an important factor in maintaining and renewing an uncompromising spirit, refusing to be bound by routine and the risk of institutionalisation.
* An associative (co-operative) movement

- As a co-operative movement, MSF seeks to transfer the ideals of a voluntary organisation into its internal and operational structure.
- The MSF organisation in each country must remain open by right to all persons who, through their respect for the MSF Charter, their commitment and continuing availability, their sense of responsibility and their disinterested motivation, demonstrate a real membership in the MSF movement.
- Each volunteer (member) must be allowed to participate actively on the basis of an equal vote for each person, bearing in mind the constant turnover in volunteers that is a necessary adjunct of an open organisation.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The principles outlined above govern MSF’s objectives and are the basis for a set of codes of conduct that have been adopted by all the sections.

- Code of conduct for emergency operations
- Code of conduct for witnessing (témoignage)
- Code of conduct in regard to funding

The following recommendations can be added to the codes of conduct.

1. Seventy-five percent of all resources (human, material and financial) must be devoted to populations in crisis situations.

2. In order to maintain the medical ethos of MSF, at least 20% of volunteers in the field must be doctors.

3. The MSF movement as a whole aims to raise 50% of its income from private sources, in line with the code of conduct for funding. This may be facilitated by taking advantage of the growing emphasis on MSF as an international organisation.
   - A special effort should be made to raise private funds in those countries (with sections or delegate offices) offering a sizeable but as yet untapped potential.
   - The creation of an international fund should strengthen coordination between sections in emergency operations.
   - Institutional funding should be specifically sought for financing such headquarters activities as training and research thus ensuring that a maximum of private funding is allocated for the field.
   - There must be an effort to diversify funding sources and some potential donations may sometimes have to be refused.

4. MSF considers that it has a responsibility to limit administrative and development costs to 20% of each section’s budget.

5. Both volunteers and salaried employees must keep MSF totally separate from their personal affiliations to other organisations or institutions, from other outside activities and from any political stance they may adopt. They must inform their Board of Directors of their involvement in other organisations if this risks a conflict of interests or loyalties.
6. In order to ensure the required turnover in volunteers, at least 30% of posts in the field must be reserved for those going out on a humanitarian mission for the first time.

7. There must only be a limited number of volunteers in the field with the status of ‘salaried employee’. The sections must agree a common definition of this status as soon as possible so that the limit may be fixed and understood by all.

8. The members of the Boards of Directors of MSF must be elected by the Annual General Assemblies.
   - Each Board may co-opt a maximum of one-third of its members for specific reasons (e.g. for their particular expertise or in order to promote the internationalisation of the organisation). However, it is preferable that these persons should also be elected.
   - The majority of Board members must be doctors or para-medics.
   - In order to maintain a balance between the operational and co-operative aspects of MSF, permanent salaried staff may hold no more than 25% of the votes at the AGM.
   - With a view to encouraging the internationalisation of the organisation, members of other sections or Delegate Offices should be actively encouraged to stand for election to different Boards.
   - The legal structure of each branch of the organisation should be that which is most appropriate for the expression of a voluntary organisation as contained within the national legislation of the country concerned.