



## **Partnerships: working across boundaries**

Emergency operations

### **Jo da Silva**

If you're faced with a situation where effectively what you are being asked to do is manage chaos; you have to recognise that you can't control it. Your job is to shape it.

### **Clair Mills**

It important to have a clear idea of what want to achieve.

### **John Heeneman**

Sometimes you have to not just do it yourself but ask people to do it for you. I mean you cannot build yourself two thousand latrines that are needed in the refugee camp, so you have to organise it.

### **Commentary:**

Many organisations work in a global context and manage people, projects, ideas and resources across boundaries.

The boundaries might occur between departments or teams within an organisation; between different organisations; or across nations, cultures or geography.

For non-governmental organisations, NGOs, involved in humanitarian work, managing across boundaries is central to what they do.

### **Commentary:**

Humanitarian emergencies like the 2004 Asian tsunami present the most extreme challenges. Jo da Silva, an engineer from Britain, was involved in the international reconstruction effort in Sri Lanka.

### **Jo da Silva**

After the Tsunami I was invited by UNHCR to go and work for them as their senior shelter coordinator. People were in tents, in hospitals, in school buildings, in temple buildings in makeshift shacks. My job was to coordinate and manage the transitional shelter programme. Essentially, if you imagine a situation; you've got five hundred thousand people who've lost their homes spread out over a thousand kilometres of coastline, and you're in a country which normally builds five thousand houses a year. Working in a post disaster situation the task is not defined and it needs defining. The way that I overcame that was really right at the beginning, holding a meeting, and there are two things; one is establishing a common vocabulary, and that was understanding that it was transitional shelter, it wasn't temporary shelter or semi permanent shelter, or something else; it was one thing and we were all trying to do one thing. We were working together on one program, and we all understood the purpose of that programme was to bridge the gap between emergency and permanent. The Second, I think really important thing at that very beginning point, was finding my allies. There was no way I was going to manage and coordinate this top-down: It needed to be disseminated outwards. And that was find ... harnessing the capacity of the big players to help me and help filter messages down in their local regions.

In the UK when you come up against a blockage it's usually find more people or more money. You usually can do that. There, it's about harnessing local capacity and recognising that things are never going to go as fast as you want them to. And being patient and just trying to bind the situation together, bind people and relationships together, so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

### **Commentary**

Coordinating the work of government agencies, NGOs, private sector organisations and individuals is a common theme in cross-boundary work.

### **Commentary**

Medecins Sans Frontieres, Doctors without Borders, is a humanitarian organisation that provides medical assistance to populations in danger in 70 countries.

MSF consists of partner sections in 19 countries, five of which are operational, which means they recruit and send people into the field.

MSF has an international council, but the council has no executive functions. The council upholds MSF's mission, core values and common charter. It also facilitates communication and debate between the MSF partners on medical policy, advocacy and external relationships.

This forum is crucial in an organisation made up of so many different nationalities and cultures.

MSF Holland is one of the five major operational centres.

### **Michel Farkas**

If you look at the mission of MSF or our goal then all nineteen are committed to the same mission statement and we are all very clear on why we want to work in certain areas of the world. If you look at how we do things, then in Holland there's a tendency to really think in processes or procedures and getting some substantial structure in place to make sure it works. The French, as far as I can see, are more on the philosophical level they are very good in my opinion in telling the more principled debate on the table. And we always say if there was a big crisis in the world, to put it very nastily, the French would go to the newspaper with some kind of j'accuse and put a big advertisement out on a message like 'there's something wrong, we have to be there we have to act on our humanitarian impulse.' The Dutch would probably have a meeting and start planning how many people should be there. That's really a very black and white division between the two sections.

### **Thijs van Burren**

MSF is not a competitive movement. We really try to work and cooperate and there is a sort of development and we all evolve in the same direction, but at the same time there are cultural differences. There are absolute differences about how we feel internationally we should be governed. If that is more central or de-central. In Holland we think we should be more decentralized so we want to have more authority to decide certain things ourselves.

### **Commentary**

Medecins Sans Frontieres not only has to cross cultural divides within its operational and partner sections.

The Dutch office also deploys at least 1,000 international volunteers in field missions every year and employs about 8,000 national staff in those countries.

Different approaches to employment make this a complex task.

### **Michel Farkas**

The basic problem or complex issue is that if you think that people from the western world are all the same, you've already started making mistakes. So the people we get from Germany working for us are really of a different cultural background from people from Holland. That of course gets more complex if you have people from Afghanistan as a doctor working for us in

an African country. And I think that a big part of the HR issues are that we are totally organised, or for a big part organised, as a western organisation. The way we do our recruitment, the way we think about labour contracts, the way we think about job evaluations, is all according to western standards.

### **Commentary**

MSF is a medical emergency organisation, but it doesn't only employ medics. A large number of people provide logistical support. Given the pressures of their work, the two groups can't allow boundaries to develop between them.

### **John Heeneman**

We always say you have more or less two important parts in the work of MSF Holland. It is of course the medical part; it's the medical people who are doing the real work with the beneficiaries and the patients. But for them to do their work as a medical person there's everything around it; to ensure they have the materials to work with, that the team has a place to live in, that materials are getting in in time for missions; all of that is logistics.

### **Clair Mills**

You need to have clear expectations, especially around performance and outputs. And be consistent. I think some people think that because they're doctors or whatever that they can work without any supervision or guidance. But for me it's the same as if you were working on the road and have to build a new bridge; everybody has got to have the idea that you are building the bridge, and with a doctor you might not have to tell him exactly what technique to use, but you need to make sure you're 'building the same bridge'...

### **John Heeneman**

For me it's all about team management and one of the most important things whether it's a large team or a small team, you have to be able to work with each other, to live with each other and to communicate with each other. I mean there are only drugs in the cupboard if they are ordered. And that's not the task for the medical person; it's the task of the logistician. But the logistician can only make the order if he knows from the medical person what he needs and the amounts of material he needs.

### **Commentary**

MSF often enters emergency situations at short notice, crossing many boundaries to deploy people and equipment. Expats sent to field missions generally work on short contracts. This presents its own problems.

### **Clair Mills**

We are an emergency organization so by definition we go into places where we haven't worked before, quite often, or even if we've worked there before it will be a different site, or a different geographical location in a country. And we have a fairly short term perspective.

### **Thijs van Buuren**

It's sometimes complicated because we work with a lot of staff, quite a high turnover and so sometimes continuity or liaising with people is difficult because they might not know what has happened before.

### **Michel Farkas**

Most people on average will spend between nine and twelve months on a mission. Most of them will only go out once or twice, so you can guess that 80% of the staff we have in the field have a maximum experience of one and a half years of doing this work. That means that you can't just relate on their experience you have to make sure that standard operational procedures, standard processes and also some tool kits are in place.

## **Commentary**

Standardised equipment and procedures help new staff get to grips with unfamiliar situations. This is one of the ways that MSF manages its work across boundaries.

But alongside its protocols, MSF values innovation and flexibility. The organisation looks for new ideas from its staff and invites them to challenge its assumptions.

## **Clair Mills**

It's a bit Schizophrenic because on the one hand we have a lot of people who aren't very experienced – so we have a lot of protocols, and guidelines and 'how to do it' kind of manuals. On the other hand we want people to say 'but I can use this antibiotic at home why can't I use it in Sudan?' So there is a balance there. And I guess what we try and tell people is 'Have a look around, see what's going on, learn a bit but yeah continue to challenge us about what is going on.'

## **Thijs Van Burren**

We encourage people to innovate and to become more efficient and explore probably unexpected routes and I think that's very much built into the organisation and that's also part of the existence of MSF; we have to innovate to adapt to the outside world because its constantly changing. Not one disaster or earthquake is similar to the other so you have to. The demands on us from the outside world; accountability, governance are also changing so there you see that you have to adapt the organisation to that.

## **Commentary**

Part of being a creative and responsive organisation is collecting the experiences gained by staff when they return from missions, and making use of their ideas.

## **John Heeneman**

We are always debriefing logisticians coming back from field. So anybody after his mission, whether it's a short or a long mission, we are talking with them here in the office, just to debrief them on their experiences; what have they found out and what kind of problems have they encountered.

## **Michel Farkas**

The ideas for innovation can come from the field, but the implementation and the format of innovation is based in headquarters.

## **Commentary**

High staff turnover means that innovations must be fed back to missions from the operational centres.

But there is continuity in MSF's field work, and much of it comes from national staff in the host countries.

## **Clair**

One of the factors in continuity is also the role of our national staff, in countries. Often they have more of a sense of what has been going on with the project and certainly local knowledge of the culture and the context. But often they aren't in the decision making positions. But its one thing that we always say to first-mission expatriates is, you know, learn from the staff that have been there because they will know a lot more than you do.

## **Commentary:**

MSF recruits volunteers with the necessary professional or practical expertise. Even so, on a first mission, staff can be ill-prepared for the difficulties they're faced with on the ground.

**Tim Foster**

By its nature humanitarian work is uncertain. Things are changing rapidly; you might have dramatic changes either in your capacity to help, in terms of funding, or the situation might change very rapidly, so uncertainty is a part of humanitarian work.

**Commentary:**

And the pressure to save lives can lead to strained relationships during the early stages of a project

**Tim Foster**

Building teams is a major challenge; it is very difficult. The reason is, as I say, people have been working together for the first time and the emphasis in the early days of emergencies inevitably falls on activities, on action, on getting things done. What that means is that the individual and the team suffer. The individual finds themselves that they are not getting the attention and the support they needed, there is constant pressure on them to act, and the team might not have really formed, and with the constant turnover of staff, you find not only does the team need to be formed, it needs to be reformed frequently as there are changes in staff.

**Commentary:**

This means that the organisation also looks for certain personal qualities and behaviours amongst its staff.

**Thijs Van Burren**

One of the main things is to take time; so not to come in and think you know it all and seen it all and start pulling files out of cupboards and things like that. But really being on the ground and taking time to talk to people. I've learned to listen quite a lot, especially to national staff. And try to build a relationship with them with is not one that is like from an authoritarian or a more directive viewpoint, but really like taking in information.

**Michel**

One of the top-list criteria in which we recruit people is that they should be flexible and flexible not translated as they are willing to work hard or that kind of stuff, normally if people are flexible it means they are willing to work two hours longer than the normal time, but in our line of work that's twenty four hours a day you're working for the organisation. It means that people when they are in the field they all have to start reflecting on themselves. What is my behaviour, expressing to a lot of people? How can I change my behaviour if it's not effective? How can I make sure I find people in my surrounds who will give me feedback when I have to change something?

**Commentary**

Communication and knowledge sharing are vital when managing across boundaries. But with MSF's inevitably high staff turnover, this can be a challenge.

**Clair**

Well I guess there's communication and there's information flow. I think compared to when I first went to the field 10 years ago plus, there's an amazing array of information and information technology to use. It's rather, that we send too much information sometimes with that we haven't developed a very sophisticated way of managing that information and I think sometimes we assume that because an email has been sent that something has actually been communicated, and of course that's not communication. For me it's also important to consider that we have a very high turnover of staff and so we have to be realistic, we know we are going to have to repeat ourselves a lot and we try and take advantage of every opportunity to make sure that we can get people updated.

**Commentary:**

MSF is also taking steps to improve its knowledge management.

**Marcel**

We are at this moment busy fitting out a way of getting our information management in a much better in place. There is in one of our sections in the UK a project called the Memory Project. That's somebody interviewing people in different countries where we've worked and writes down whatever happens, almost like a journal for every day or every year these are the main things what happened, this is how it worked. And it also means that people go to a country and they can take the one on, for example, Afghanistan, Angola and see what in all these years happened there.

**Commentary:**

The complexities of managing across boundaries can have an impact on efficiency. But MSF's ethos of providing medical help to people in danger means that cost effectiveness is not always a primary consideration.

**Thijs**

We have in the whole society obviously there is an accountability towards our donors, they have to know what their money is being used for and how we spend the money and that we do it in a useful manner, as efficient as possible, although we also say sometimes we're not even that efficient and because also we have to make choices and to be somewhere sometimes fast and sometimes its rather inefficient to do an emergency relief operation. It's a difficult message but I think we manage to bring it.

**Commentary:**

MSF works across many and diverse boundaries. As an organisation it embodies flexibility and commitment. And it bridges the divides it encounters through its shared values and a culture of debate, openness and clarity of purpose.