MEETING OF THE INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL
Paris, 19-20 September 1997 (J-M. Kindermans)

Present: Philippe BIBERSON, Marleen BOELAERT, Odysseas BOUDOURIS, Carlo FABER, Alain GUILLOUX, Jens HILLINGSÖ, Jacques DE MILLIANO, Filomena PIETRANTONIO, Tim PITI, Morten ROSTRUP, Doris SCHOPPER, Fiona TERY, Johan VAN SCREEB, Clemens VLASICH, Eric VREDE, Ulrike VON PILAR.
Invited: Michel COURVALLET, Eric GOEMAERE, Bernard PECOUL, Olaf VALVERDE, Lex WINKLER.
Apologies: Pedro ARCOS, Dominique LEGUILLER, Joëlle TANGUY.

Friday, 19 September

Introduction (P. Biberson)

There have been a number of dysfunctions over the past six months, mainly:
- dissension in regard to advocacy (témoignage);
- difficulties in integrating operational capabilities.

These led to a crisis of confidence, both between sections and with the field, illustrated by unacceptable exchanges in the internal newsletters, and a widespread feeling of deception as much had been expected following recent evolutions in the international movement. This reduced the IC’s credibility, as regards both its aptitude to create a coherent international project and to integrate conceptual differences.

The IC issued a unanimous statement that can be found in annex.

1) Recommendations from the AGMs

It is an encouraging sign that a very large majority of volunteers favours the construction of a harmonious international movement and does not wish to return to thinking in terms of sections. This is illustrated by a motion passed by most of the AGMs, calling on the international authorities to present to the next AGMs a model for an international structure that respects the criteria of an operational, democratic, juridical and financial viability applicable at the level of each section.

2) Information from the Executive Group (L. Winkler)

A) The provisional data for 1997 (resources, growth, budget/mission environment, human resources) reflect important variations in the strategic orientations of the sections:
- there is an inequality between the various sections in regard to the funds each provides to the different fields; the degree of presence and the amount of resources allocated in certain contexts by each section does not follow any
obvious logic, and questions remain in regard to the allocation of the overall resources of MSF;
- the size of the head office varies greatly from one section to another, as well as the ratio between the number of posts at head office and in the field. The most favourable growth estimates (+50% between 1996 and 2000) is based on a balance between private and institutional funding as defined at Chantilly. From now on it should be possible to address the question of MSF growth for the movement overall.

B) During the meeting of the GDs/DirsOps in April, the following were set as medium-term aims:
- to work as one single MSF in emergencies and conflict situations, encouraging the participation of all the sections;
- to distinguish the main outline of a common global operational strategy that would help in formulating the 1998 annual plans for each section to ensure more coherence between them.
In the longer term:
- to exchange information on operational activities with a view to increasing complementarity between sections and leading to the elaboration of a common operational policy;
- to put in place the structures and systems required to fulfill our ambition for a more global reform (ET, supplies, etc.).
The set timetable has been altered by the Zairian crisis and the internal difficulties for MSF that resulted when the code of conduct for advocacy was badly applied because of several factors: too many decision-makers, poor coordination between GDs, no “hygiene” rules, not enough or no consultation with the field, etc.

C) In order that this delayed process can continue, the Executive Group must meet a certain number of conditions and commitments:
- resolve the question of advocacy with minimal “hygiene” rules;
- devote more time and energy to international objectives; pay more attention to the internal information in sections on progress and decisions in regard to them; follow up and control their application;
- begin a process aimed at an overall reform of the organisation, both for operational centres and support structures;
- provide support through a strong International Presidency.

3) A point in regard to international projects (J-M. Kindermans)

Before examining three of these individually, the extent of general progress made in international projects was looked at. Those covering operations, with variable but often little progress, could be given considerable dynamism with the elaboration of the first common operational plan to be presented in March 1998. Projects regarding other sectors (HR, technical, communications, etc.) have also experienced different degrees of advancement and have often disappointed.
Faced with these difficulties, two types of reaction surfaced:
- by abandoning or lowering our objectives in case of resistance, we break down rather than build up;
- we should throw ourselves into other projects if those underway cannot be realised.

Finally, without giving up on other projects, the IC unanimously requested the Executive Group to concentrate on two projects in particular and to present an implementation plan at the next Restricted Committee meeting on 2 January 1998:

a) policy papers (setting out a common operational policy for a country where MSF is working) intended to give a first priority to seven or eight countries and to envisage the possibility of working with one or some international facilitators going to the field. In fact, this represents the point of departure for establishing an international operational policy.

b) an MSF international newsletter for information and the exchange of views without thinking in terms of sections, with the modalities to be defined.

4) The particular examples of three international projects

These three projects were analysed separately because of their importance and the possibility of making progress in them.

A) ET - a common response to emergencies (L. Winkler)

Bogged down in national strategies, ET needs a new breath of life. Everyone is convinced of the need to provide a common response to emergencies by supporting ET and its principles. This is why a framework must be defined before the end of the year, one which should clearly point in the direction of a transfer of responsibilities from head offices to a joint international emergency team (see the minutes of the GDs' meeting of 28/8/97).

The IC supported this proposal unanimously, as well as the creation of a joint venture between the sections to resolve the financial problems linked with ET.

B) Supplies (B. Pécout)

Faced with various factors and current constraints in regard to supplies, the proposed response is to implement a single supply policy for MSF. This should take the form of one structure controlled by all the sections together, adapted for MSF missions, into which the present structures are economically integrated, and open to the outside market. This new organisation should start up in January 1998, and be completed by the end of 1999. All operational centres agree to develop this project with the exception of Amsterdam, which questions the necessity for this control and is wary of the "commercial" aspect of selling products (but which nevertheless agreed to support research and development).

The proposal was adopted, with the Dutch section abstaining as it did not wish to be involved in this phase of the project.
C) Training (E. Goemaere)

MSF training requires a common training curriculum so as to become more cohesive than it is presently. Its function should be to prepare and improve volunteer capabilities up to a certain level, as well as to ensure continuous adaptation in line with the evolution of our activities. In addition, there is a requirement in regard to higher level training, which should be more open to the exterior. For this reason, a post of International Training Coordinator was proposed (see D. Schopper’s report).

The IC gave its unanimous support to the creation of this post and the main outline proposed.

5) Advocacy code of conduct (E. Goemaere)

In response to the polemics on the denunciations of the horrendous acts committed in Zaire, the IC unanimously expressed the will to establish common rules for advocacy where there are large-scale human rights violations and the security of MSF teams if affected. Four remarks were made in regard to the text submitted by the Executive Group:
- a distinction should be made between a campaign of denunciation and advocacy in the form of factual and actual information (as in Kibeho and Gorazde);
- volunteers should have the possibility of leaving if they are not in agreements and fear for their safety;
- Operations Directors who must agree are those concerned with the crisis.
- Information must reach the sections not involved in such operations before the advocacy action is carried out.

While taking account of these remarks, the IC adopted this text, which is only provisional as it was drawn up as a matter of urgency. A more elaborate and sustainable version will be presented at the IC meeting in March 1998. The Australian and British sections decided to abstain nevertheless as they found the text too vague, particularly in regard to advocacy in the form of factual and actual information.

6) Protection of the MSF name

The IC confirmed the decisions taken during the Restricted Committee meeting of May 1997:

- agreement to protect first the name “Médecins Sans Frontières”, and the logo, with translations on a case-by-case basis in line with the languages used in each country. This protection will be pursued as a priority in the countries where there is greater potential for the creation and development of a section.
the protection of the name to be used as a means of internal unification. It was decided to transfer ownership of the name to MSF International from all the sections that still retain this, and to establish a licence contract between MSF International and each of the sections to control the conditions for using the name. In the eventuality of sanctions or exclusion, rather than using listed criteria, it was decided to hand the question over to the IC to take such decisions by studying each case, with the condition that any decision taken should be made by a very large majority.

These decisions were taken unanimously and the necessary budgets for implementing them were approved.

Saturday, 20 September

7) Committees

A) Operationality (O. Boudouris)
Following the presentation by O. Boudouris (see text), there was a debate on section operationality, as well as possible structures and models for the international organisation of MSF. It was recognised that there are different ways of being operational or of progressing towards operationality according to the different sections, and that these different ways should be expressed within each operational centre.

In order to move forward, the following was proposed in the short term (up to the next IC meeting).

To work with the existing structures while working on a thorough reform.
- To define an “operational” centre, its rights and obligations (Odysseas’ commission).
- To define “operationality” and “sharing operationality” (Odysseas’ commission).
- To work towards a common structure for emergencies (Executive Group).

In the medium term

To create a new structure.
- To define a common operational policy (Executive Group).
- To establish the guiding principles of this reform (IC President and Secretariat).
- To choose the most appropriate structure to meet the needs of populations (Executive Group).

The Executive Group will closely participate in the work of the operationality commission as this will cover operational centres. National Boards should also be involved regularly in these discussions.
B) MSF expansion policy (U. Von Pilar)

The document has been transmitted and will be debated at a later date.

C) “Jurisdictions” (T. Pitt)

A revision of the roles played by the Boards, IC, etc. Was put forward (see text) and discussed, as well as the possibility of calling together a “congress”. The text was discussed, some suggested changes were formulated, but the main outline was accepted. A second version will be prepared by the commission, which will assist Tim (Eric, Johan, Fiona, Marleen). Their report will be rapidly communicated to the members of the IC so that it can be discussed by the national Boards before the next Restricted Committee meeting.

8) International Presidency

No candidate was prepared to commit for two years. This provoked two reactions and proposals.
1) There is a need for a President who can be very present, working at least three days a week, and who might be looked for from outside the current IC.
2) At the moment, the President should be someone from the IC, whose principal task would simply be to organise meetings or events for discussions.

A discussion followed and a vote was taken in favour of the first solution. There were 11 members in favour and three against (France, Greece and Hong Kong) and one abstention (Italy).

Doris Schopper was then unanimously elected as President until the next AGMs. Her task over the next few months will be to carry out research into possible candidates for the Presidency. Each Board will be able to propose a candidate in line with the following criteria:
- a medical doctor;
- a minimum of four years experience within MSF;
- bilingual English/French;
- available at least three days a week.

9) Proposal for the Greek section

Following recent exchanges between the IC and the Greek section, it was noted that this section has met the demands of the IC overall. The Greek section now wishes to profit from its new direction towards integration into the MSF movement. It has abandoned the idea of an independent operationality and propose to merge its operational side with an operational centre. Direct contacts have been made with the Spanish section, but they have not yet produced a result. The Swiss and French sections each proposed integrating the Greek section into their operational centre. While aware of the urgency to agree a clear status for the Greek section, which has been in a very particular
situation for a long time, the IC is asking for more information. It agreed that the Restricted Committee should examine the written proposals to be put together by P. Biberson and O. Boudouris so that a decision can then be submitted to the IC.

10) An ethical guide intended for volunteers (J. Van Schreeb)

The IC decided to form a working group to look into this. It appears that among the volunteers, very few know the limits to be respected in regard to the values and attitudes that we wish to preserve. This sometimes results in unacceptable behaviour in the field.

11) Other matters

- anti-personnel mines: what participation in the campaign?
- working towards an MSF charter and common texts;
- coordination between Boards: Doris would like to systematise the contacts between the members of the different Boards;
- dates of the next international meetings;
  Restricted Committee: 16 January 1998
  IC: 19-20-21 March 1998 (to be confirmed).
Statement by the International Council

Since 1993, we have repeatedly witnessed in the Great Lakes region large-scale human rights abuses. This culminated in the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, but since then we have been regularly faced with extermination practices, in Rwanda as well as in Burundi and in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Aid organisations, especially Médecins Sans Frontières, are obliged to develop their programmes in a context where assistance is blocked, access to populations is denied, there is a tactical use of aid for criminal ends and volunteers and local MSF staff are physically threatened. For these reasons, by well-controlled assistance activities and an information policy (targeted and public), we must work towards reducing the level of violence to which populations are subjected and creating a working space for humanitarian organisations.

In this context, high quality humanitarian actions require:
- a detailed analysis of the logic behind the different players concerned and of the working space that is actually available;
- assistance activities in line with identified needs, taking care that these activities will not turn against the interests of the populations concerned;
- a policy for spreading information that is initiated from the field, which should be on-going and should describe the state of health of the population, and the responsibilities, results, limits and contradictions of the aid provided.

While taking into account the difficulties of the last few months and the errors made internally (and their negative consequences on the teams in the field), the International Council reaffirms its confidence and support for the Executive Committee (General Directors) and the Operations Directors in the steps to be taken to restore a climate of confidence within the MSF movement.

Several decisions have been taken towards this end:
1. - the revision of the advocacy code.
2. - a facilitator sent to the region (see the Minutes of GDs/DirsOps meeting of 28/8/97).
3. - a working group set up with human rights organisations in the Great Lakes region.