

MINI-GENERAL ASSEMBLY

In 1992, MSF Belgium started to organise Mini-General Assemblies (mini-GA) in the field. Those meetings were supposed to encourage the volunteers in the field to meet and reflect on MSF and to issue motions, if needed, to the General Assemblies in Brussels.

In May 1992 the MSF Belgium General Assembly voted a motion in favour of 'involving local staff in MSF field orientation and mini-GA'.



Minutes from MSF Belgium Board meeting, 7 January 1992 (in French)

Extract:

5. Mini-GAs

[...] Jean-Pierre Luxen [General Director of MSF Belgium] explained that the document produced by him (read during the session by Erwin Vermeersch [a member of MSF Belgium's board]) should be considered complementary to the proposal submitted by Jean-Benoît Burrion [a member of MSF Belgium's board] and not in the least contradictory. [...]

6. Proposal by J. B Burrion [...]

Jean-Benoît [Burrion] presented the project in brief and reiterated its ultimate aim as being to involve the people from the field more in General Assemblies.

Jean-Pierre Luxen is on board with this proposal but highlighted two points that need to be taken into consideration to avoid disappointing the 'new' attendees to the GA [General Assembly]:

1. That the people from head office and the board should be particularly available;
2. That new attendees are clearly included in the debates and topics covered during coordination week and the GA (so this might mean reorganising the GA) [...]

On behalf of the board, Erwin Vermeersch supported Jean-Benoît Burrion's proposal 110% and felt this commitment needs to be managed by:

- Setting objectives with the people in the field who are elected so that on their return to the field, they uphold the continuity of the decisions made.
- Setting up a working group to plan this GA.

In the opinion of Jean-Benoît Burrion, it's clear that this new strategy implies changing how the GA (and coordination week) is organised and forming a working group for its preparation.

Georges Dallemagne [Director of Operations at MSF Belgium] believes that the organisation of the mini-GAs is effectively an efficient and useful initiative. However, as regards the proposal to boost people from the field, it's not altogether certain that everyone from head office and the board can be as available as needed to 'bring them on board' them. Accordingly, it might be preferable to create other discussion forums where they can speak and be clearly heard. Georges Dallemagne also addressed the issue of co-opted members who are present in Belgium (and sometimes from head office) and who don't all take part in the GAs. Shouldn't we bring them on board? We also need to minimise the financial burden this project might entail.

Pierre Harzé [Director of Communications at MSF Belgium] agreed with the proposal submitted by Jean-Benoît Burrion and underscored the symbolic importance of the GA (and the ability to participate).

Conclusion:

The four-point proposal [...] was adopted, on a trial basis for this year, and will be evaluated. The working group will consist of: Claire Bourgeois [MSF Belgium's Board member], Jean-Benoît Burrion, Pierre Harzé + 3 others chosen from the executive board.



'Minutes from MSF Belgium Board of Directors Meeting,' 14 February 1992 (in French).

Extract:

3. Mini-General Assembly

The Board members are heading out to the field soon to hold mini-general assemblies and demonstrate that there is a desire for discussion at the peripheral level. Those who wish to travel with a member of the executive may do so. These trips have been delayed slightly because the operations department wanted to coordinate the arrival of Board members with meetings on site. [...]

Please note that Jean-Pierre Luxen [MSF Belgium's General Director] will go to Southeast Asia, a region that the Board members do not cover. Other countries will not host a Board member visit, and we all send our regrets.

The materials on the subjects for discussion have yet to be prepared.



Minutes from the MSF Belgium General Assembly meeting, 16 and 17 May 1992 (translated from French)

Extract:

Local human resources [...]

1.D. Include local staff in the strategic orientation of MSF in the field and in the mini-GAs. [...]

Note that the votes for point 1D alone are as follows: 84 for, 50 against and 32 abstentions.

In 1993, the General Assembly rejected a motion that, mostly for budget reasons, refused to allow delegates of the mini-AGs to attend the General Assembly in Brussels.



Minutes from MSF Belgium's Board meeting, 3 November 1993 (translated from French)

Extract:

7. Fitness of mini-GA attendees returning for the GA [General Assembly]

Without undermining the mini-GAs in the field, the Executive Committee has asked for the mini-GA attendees not to be brought back for the GA, for several reasons: the GA is already a complex operation, and the return of mini-GA attendees would be an additional burden, it produces nothing new and leads to confusion in respect of the role of the coordinator and the role of the GA itself; also, we've noticed that the people 'elected' to come back are often the same who come back for the various training courses, which combined with holidays can cause fairly long absences in the field.

The 'return of mini-GA attendees' is one of the many aspects of administering democracy at MSF, administration which is becoming increasingly onerous. Now seems a constructive time to assess and improve this administration:

- Define the mandates of the mini-GAs in the field. What do we expect from the mini-GAs in concrete terms: fresh ideas, discussions on topics predetermined by head office or more simply the taking on board in the field of the decisions already taken or about to be taken by MSF?
- Redefine the role of the coordinators in the GA process: beyond the content for the 'Coordination week', are they responsible for passing on the ideas which emerge during the mini-GAs?
- Role of administrators for mini-GAs.
- Role of motions voted at the GA in the daily functioning of the organisation. [...]

Comments:

- While it's true that the cost of bringing back mini-GA attendees is high, it's not true to say this offers nothing new.
- We need to rethink the GA in general terms and work together on these aspects to make the GA a simpler and clearer instrument.

VOTE The return of mini-GA attendees for the GA is one of the many aspects to consider with regard to overseeing democracy at MSF. Should it be withdrawn for the GA in 1994?

FOR 0

AGAINST 11

ABSTENTION 1

 *With Pascal Meus [MSF Belgium's Board member] and others, we said that the field should be allowed to have a more direct impact, to be able to submit motions to the MSF Belgium general assemblies. We also had to review who could be a member. So, we held mini-general assemblies. Discussions were held within the missions, with comments forwarded to the General Assembly. It's very easy today, with online connections, but back then we went into the field to lead those discussions. It wasn't always easy to organise, but it was always great. The discussions focused a lot on operations.*

Dr Marleen Bollaert, MSF Belgium - President, 1995-1998
(in French)

 *The objective of the mini-general assemblies, thanks to the proposals forwarded from the field, was to find a balance to ensure that the executive and its proposals did not dominate the work of the board of directors. We tried to bring in proposals from the grassroots. We wanted the board to discuss topics other than purely executive issues. At that time, the board's agenda reflected the needs of the executive. Starting in 1995, we*

created a balance between the issues the board and the elected directors wanted to discuss and the executive's issues. So, the agendas were relatively balanced between the problems that the executive wanted to place on the agenda and those issues that we felt were important to discuss within the association.

Dr Pascal Meeus, MSF Belgium - Board Member 1995-1999,
President 1999-2001 (in French)

In December 1995, the International Council decided that international mini-GAs should be organised in all MSF operational countries. These mini-GAs were intended to include all sections present on the ground. The first international mini-GAs were held in March and April 1996. Their outcomes were presented and discussed at Chantilly II, and some of their recommendations regarding the joint governance were integrated in the Chantilly Documents.



Minutes from the MSF International Council meeting, 14 December 1995 (translated from French)

Extract:

Item 4. Organisation of the mini international GAs and coordinators meeting in May 1996.

a) Questions:

- Do we want to organise these mini-GAs along the lines taken by MSF Belgium?
- Do we want to make it a one-off event for 1996 or repeat it yearly?
- What investment/effort do we want to put in?

b) Criteria adopted:

- countries with over 20 staff;
- organisation = based on scale of presence in each country;
- facilitators come from different boards of the sections present in the field, for reasons of crossover.

c) Discussions on topics:

- People in the field still feel far removed from head offices;
- Need for information concerning Chantilly and the international dimension in general.

d) Conclusion:

- To show people they do have influence within the organisation.
- The Presidents will meet at a later stage and will decide on general matters (list of countries, organisation and responsibilities, topics, communications).
- Confirmation of the two international coordinators' days: 8 and 9 May 1996, in Bordeaux.



Preparatory Document for the MSF International Council Meeting, 20 June 1996 (in French).

Extract:

Between March and April 1996, 21 mini-general assemblies were held. Each involved 10-50 people. A report on the discussions held during these meetings was presented at Chantilly 2. [...] Organisational problems aside, which should easily be addressed in the future, in general, these mini-general assemblies were a success for several reasons:

- for the first time, MSF field staff had a chance to discuss, together, the issues debated within MSF;
- this created a sense of being part of an organisation and being able to influence some of the decisions (although there was still scepticism regarding the real power of the recommendations made at the mini-general assemblies);
- board members had a chance to meet and to assess and compare their ideas about MSF's development;
- board members were exposed to the 'field' more intensively than during normal field visits; and,
- the concrete recommendations that emerged from the 21 mini-general assemblies were surprisingly similar.

Most of the recommendations will either be incorporated in the 'final Chantilly text' (document on identity) or will be taken up during the international coordinators' meeting. However, there are a host of recommendations that should be addressed separately. The discussions on the voluntary and associative character of MSF led to concrete requests [...] such as to:

- provide better and ongoing information on MSF developments throughout the year;
- brief all volunteers on the structure and operations of the MSF movement, with particular emphasis on the association;
- standardise the rules for members and voting rules across all MSF entities (primarily the sections, but the delegate offices as well, if possible);
- give the field greater weight in the association, make membership automatic after six months' work in the field and de-co-opt members who have shown no interest after three years;
- establish direct democracy: all members may vote directly (vote by mail from the field);
- allow national staff (local) whose duties are similar to those of expatriate staff to participate in internal MSF discussions and become voting members; and,
- hold meetings like the mini-general assemblies regularly to allow the field to participate in discussions and MSF's development.



Minutes from the MSF International Council meeting, 20 June 1996 (in French)

Extract:

3. Summary of the mini-GAs

Doris Schopper [MSF Switzerland President] has written a report summing up the conclusions drawn from the 21 mini-GAs that took place in March and April; [...]

Observations:

- a group request to harmonise definitions (members of MSF, joint operations; etc.);

- evaluation of the mini-GA process: greater demand for participation from the field and more consultation with the field;
- cost of organising mini-GAs?

Comment: there are 2 types of entity

- A entity with national authority in which the field has little input;
- A associate entity operating in the field (mini-GAs, coordination week, etc.); current thinking is more geared towards a national entity and we need to be clear about what is being prioritised);

Decisions:

- *Each section is asked to represent voters at the GA (in the form of 'pie chart' representation) and define the categories represented (alumni, volunteers);*
- *Provide Jean-Marie Kindermans with the name of individual board members responsible for reviewing the individual associate entities; these managers will have to know each other and form a working group on the recommendations from the mini-GAs regarding the associative;*
- *Marleen Boelaert will provide general oversight on behalf of the IC to lead this group and make recommendations.*

In 1997, the mini-AGs were organised by the field teams. However, coordination was put in place at Operational Centre headquarters level in order to ensure that specific topics were discussed as a matter of priority.



Minutes from MSF International Council meeting, 30 January 1997 (translated from French)

Extract:

IV. Organisation of international mini-GAs

The international mini-GAs will this year be organised by the field, in line with the letter from the Presidents to coordinators. While the initiative is being handed over to the field, we still feel the need to organise things at the operational centres: to regulate and inform others in relation to visits by board members; to ensure that for each mission we have understood the process and a coordinator is in charge in each country; and to guarantee that certain subjects will have high priority in discussions, so as to avoid loss of focus and facilitate an overall synthesis. Marleen Boelaert and Jacques de Milliano, aided by their assistants, are responsible for coordinating all this. Any individual can indicate the particular subjects that they want discussed at these mini-GAs. They will pick those that they feel take priority and pass this on to the coordinators.

Lastly, regarding the regional meetings that can lack focus and be controversial in terms of scale, costs and participation, Eric Goemaere will send out a message to remind everyone of their scope and limits.

In 1998, on the basis of a first review, the International Council decided to continue to hold mini-GAs as they were a valuable input from the field to General Assemblies. It

also adopted a series of recommendations to redesign future mini-GAs.



Minutes of MSF International Council Meeting, 6 November 1998 (in English)

Extract:

Item 4: Mini-General Assemblies

Bart Meijman presented the major findings of the mini-General Assemblies (m[ini] GAs) for 1996, 1997 and 1998 [...]. An overview of their organisation, the subjects discussed and resolutions was then presented, as were a series of recommendations for future m[ini] AG's.

The IC [International Council] agreed that mini AGs should continue, as they are an invaluable forum for input from the field to the General Assemblies. The recommendations for future m[ini] AGs were all accepted (see below for a summary, and the ensuing reference report for full details). These focus on

- 1) the objectives of the m[ini] AGs,
- 2) that in order to minimise cost and maximise national staff input, mAGs are to occur at the country level and not at the regional level,
- 3) that the agenda for m[ini] AGs is largely to be determined locally, with some items determined by the IC, and
- 4) that timely participation and feedback from the section boards is vital to their success.

Proposed themes for the m[ini] AGs included:

- a) a mission statement for the MSF Movement;
- b) the role of national staff in the associate group;
- c) MSF's medical focus in the coming years.

Recommendations regarding Mini AG's accepted by the IC:

1. The aim of the mini AGs is to gather all the MSF people working in one country to give them an opportunity to broaden views and build some common ground on their role, the principles and the identity of MSF and the problems from the perspective of a particular mission (e.g. how does our mission in this particular country reflect the MSF charter, principle of medical focus, témoignage, independence, 'voluntariat', etc.). In other words:
 - a) participation and international exchange of ideas in the field on translation of MSF mission in general to stimulate the associative movement;
 - b) the opportunity to formulate motions to be discussed during the General Assemblies.
2. Mini AGs must be international, must be held annually and must be held per country instead of per region, and should take a maximum of 1½ days.
3. The programme should mainly come from those in the field. Apart from that, a limited number of subjects directed from the IC for an opinion forming could be useful.
4. The IC should prepare a document – under responsibility of the President – including:
 - outlining the purpose of the mini AGs;
 - what the expectations are (these should be realistic: recommendations should be restricted to strong messages for the AGs and Boards);
 - feedback on what happened with the resolutions of the previous year;

- possible subjects that the IC would like discussed during the coming mini AGs;
5. Coordination of organisation should come from the International office in cooperation with individual section Boards.
 6. Participants should represent the whole range of staff in the projects, i.e. a good mix of first mission, experienced and national staff. Participation of national staff is very important. The total group should not become too big (max. of 30 participants).
 7. Board members that attend should be well prepared, especially on subjects that would be of interest to HQ. The Board member should also combine the mini AG with a field visit, preferably to be organised just before the mini AG, so that he/she gets a feel for the projects. If no Board members can attend a given mini AG, this mini AG should still take place.
 8. Recommendations should be formulated to give direction to and initiate useful discussions at the General Assemblies.
 9. After the mini AGs, IC members will make a selection and decide on the resolutions to be discussed at General Assembly.
 10. The President of the IC is responsible for writing a summary report that will include the resolutions to be discussed at the GAs.

In 1999, a second set of recommendations was adopted, emphasising the need to hold mini-GAs at national level rather than regional and reaffirming their international character.



Minutes from MSF International Council Meeting, 11 June 1999 (in English and French)

Extract:

Item 9: Mini AG Update

Tine Dusauchoit [MSF Belgium President] presented an overview of this years' MAGs [Mini AGs] [...]. The MAG report was also discussed [...]. She highlighted the following questions for review:

- 1) what is the purpose of the MAGs ?
- 2) to what degree is the organisation of MAGs shared equally among OCs [Operational Centres]?
- 3) is the output of MAGs equivalent to the input?
- 4) Are resolutions to AGs an effective way of channelling the output of MAGs?
- 5) How do we follow up resolutions directed to AGs and the international movement as a whole?

Discussion emphasised that the MAGs will need to be redesigned, but that annual country-based meetings are highly valuable both for cohesion in the field at individual country level and to the movement as a whole. If they did not exist they would have to be invented in one form or another. Based on the discussion, Tine [Dusauchoit] will prepare a set of recommendations for the September Restricted Committee meeting concerning the questions she posed. This will include the possibility of renaming the MAG as 'National Field Meetings', a means of distinguishing between specific national issues and issues common to the whole movement, and a means of directing resolutions and follow-up from the meetings.



Minutes from MSF International Council Meeting, 27 November 1999 (in English and French)

Extract:

Item 8: MAGs [Mini AGs]

Pascal Meeus [MSF Belgium President] presented a means of enhancing links between the IC [International Council] and the associations of each section. He argued that one role for the IC [International Council] is to be a catalyst for the dynamic advance or evolution of the associate group process, to be a guarantor of the bottom-up process, and to facilitate the exchange of ideas. A proposal to bring motions from each association was discussed in detail. It was decided that the easiest

and least bureaucratic way of doing this would be for each section board to present for a vote to the IC those motions which the section board decides are relevant to the movement as a whole. This was agreed unanimously by all 14 members remaining (4 members being absent). MSF Belgium then presented two motions. Both were voted and passed with 13 in favour, 1 abstention (4 members absent). These resolutions are:

1. Mini-AGMs are to be held in most cases at the national level with all sections present, rather than at the regional level. [...]

TO BE CONTINUED ...