

MSF LOGISTIQUE

In 1986, Jacques Pinel, Head of Logistics at MSF France, proposed to create a satellite association of MSF France that would be in charge of logistical supply. MSF France's board endorsed the proposal and decided to call the new entity 'MSF Logistique.' As it was impossible to rent affordable warehouses in Paris, MSF Logistique was set up in Lézignan in southwest France.



Minutes from MSF France Board of Directors Meeting, 5 September 1986 (in French)

Extract:

1) Logistics: Jacques Pinel discussed developments in the sector. Over the last few months, we have had problems assembling and managing, in Paris and the larger area, all the supplies, drugs, kits, and vehicles for Médecins Sans Frontières missions. The solution would be to decentralise and create a semi-autonomous structure, which could:

- Store, prepare and deliver the vehicles MSF needs on missions, manage the fleet and monitor the need for replacement parts;
- Assemble and store the kits and the supply, drugs and vaccine modules, etc.;
- Prepare, verify, and store all mission-critical equipment, generators and pumps;
- Train logisticians before their departure; and,
- Hold training sessions. This structure, which would be under MSF's control, could also be organised to operate autonomously as a 'service provider.' Lastly, it would require enough space for the preparation and storage of supplies and equipment. It would need to be located near 24-hour customs bonded premises and have a capable team in constant contact with Paris. [...]
- Status: this logistics structure could be an association under the French Law of 1901 and would be under MSF's control, but managed autonomously. It would bill MSF for its services. It could be called Médecins Sans Frontières Logistique. The project was discussed thoroughly and approved unanimously by the Board of Directors



Jacques Pinel came to see me and said, 'I suggest setting up a logistics facility in Lézignan.' I asked him to let me think about it and see how much it would cost. He answered, 'We'll manage. It's important; we shouldn't worry about the money.' In fact, the next day I told him, 'Okay, let's do it.'

Dr Francis Charhon, MSF France President 1980-1982,
Member of MSF France Management Team 1982-1992
(in French).

MSF Logistique's activities were developed and services 'sold' to other MSF operational centres and other NGOs. Therefore, the question came up to clearly distinguish, in its relations

with MSF France, those of the supplier to the customer from those of a satellite association under the control of the founding association.

In September 1994, while the General Assembly of Epicentre, another MSF France satellite, voted for a motion demanding more autonomy from MSF France. The relationships between MSF France and its satellites were discussed in-depth by the Boards of Directors of their respective associations.

To ensure that MSF operational requirements were met, the MSF Logistique board decided that the majority of their board should be comprised of MSF France representatives. However, the MSF Logistique Board would also host representatives from other MSF operational sections and from outside personalities. A technical committee in charge of supervising the orders was also established.



Minutes from MSF France Board of Directors meeting, 30 September 1994 (in French).

Extract:

Relations between MSF and satellites: Épicentre and MSF Logistique

Philippe Biberson [President of MSF France] notes that discussions have been taking place over the past few months on restructuring the relationship between MSF and its satellites, Epicentre and MSF Logistique.

- the need to separate "customer-supplier" relations from a partnership type of relationship by creating a technical committee for managing orders (consulting, training, research, etc.);

Proposed MSF/MSF Logistique relationship

Composition of Board of Directors: majority control by MSF France: two board members and two executive team members representing the board (Logistique director + general director) to ensure that MSF Logistique development remains compatible with MSF France's operational requirements.

For example, if the board consists of seven members:

- 2 MSF France board members
- 2 executives
- 1 member from another MSF section
- 2 members from outside MSF

Same board role as for Epicentre

Creation of an MSF technical committee to determine:

Orders (supplies + services)

- Type of relationship
- Evaluation of services
- Emergency stock

Consisting of:

Logistique director (Chairperson)

- 1 from Finance
- 1 from Operations
- 2nd Logistique representative
- 1 from Medical Technology

1 from Human Resources depending on the issues concerned
Frequency of oversight: Meeting between technical committee and MSF Logistique management (at least 4 times/year).

In both cases, we need a Board of Directors that meets regularly, which is not the case right now.

Bernard Chomillier [Director of MSF Logistique]: MSF Logistique

His proposals are similar overall. Logistique has no intention of leaving MSF. The main question raised before talking about autonomy is figuring out what type of control MSF wants to maintain. What will it control and at what level – revenue, development, human resources? Our operations overlap and there's a lack of clearly defined roles. When we determine the exact type of control that MSF should exercise over MSF Logistique, we'll be able to discuss the board and its composition as well as a technical committee. This should be a joint effort.

Philippe [Biberson], MSF France's President] comments that there are almost no areas of agreement in the two proposals. No one questions the satellites' value. The important thing is for MSF, MSF Logistique, and Epicentre to understand what's behind this desire for independence or for keeping the satellite within MSF. The issue here is the importance of deciding whether to grant future independence – an independence that could negatively affect MSF. A discussion then ensues between those who support management autonomy – and even independence – for the satellites and those who oppose independence for the satellites.

Proponents of autonomy or independence:

In the opinion of Alain Moren [Epicentre General Director], independence doesn't mean separation. Epicentre wants to continue working with MSF. Independence means being open to a degree of risk-taking to improve management while still maintaining ties. Epicentre feels that belonging to MSF France prevents it from working with the other sections, blocks access to donors and hinders development of large-scale projects.

Francis Charbon [member of the MSF France Management Team]: the two satellites are expressing the same malaise. These two entities were originally targeted for growth, so we can't blame them now if they have their own ideas and want to expand.

Their capacity for growth needs to be based on policies defined on an annual basis.

Valérie [Schwoebel, MSF Board Member] emphasizes the importance of risk to autonomy and independence; people work harder if they know they're going to be evaluated.[...]

Brigitte Vasset [MSF France Operations Director] believes that independence would be healthier for the organisation because the satellites are more costly to headquarters compared to field operations [...]

Opponents of independence

Frédéric Laffont [MSF France Board Member] is surprised that the satellites are asking for independence at a time when everyone agrees that things are working out. If it's too easy to succeed, then leave the MSF fold and say we'll always love you. Saying that is incompatible with independence. [...] Anyone like that can only see independence as a total break [with MSF]. We run the risk that people from outside MSF could take control of the satellite's board. In that case, why not create a marketing satellite? It's very much in MSF France's interest to keep its satellites within the fold because they make us more professional. [...]

Brigitte [Vasset]: We can't demand autonomy then ask MSF for money.

Alain Guilloux [Board Member] doesn't see any reason for an independent board – for either MSF Log or Epicentre – because it doesn't resolve either of the following two issues that it raises: MSF's ethical and policy oversight, and the customer-supplier relationship. Independent entities generate problems such as redundant jobs, conflicts, and ongoing adjustments.

Philippe [Biberson, MSF France President]: If we separate powers, as proposed by Bernard, then we should eliminate ambiguities and conflicts without raising the issue of complete independence.

Sylvie [Lemmet, MSF France Finance Director] is disturbed that the two proposals are too similar and embrace different goals. [...] She has doubts about whether we have the resources and capacity necessary to oversee and evaluate Epicentre. We do, however, have what's necessary for MSF Logistique. [...]

TO BE CONTINUED ...