

POPULATIONS IN DANGER

In 1992, the MSF International Office organised the 'Populations in Danger' Days and the production of the 'MSF Report on the Populations in Danger.' MSF France initially produced this publication, but the editorial team was progressively enlarged to authors from the whole movement.

The book was to be published in French, in English and in Spanish and to be used to sensitise the general public and the political leaders on the fate of populations in danger and on humanitarian principles.



Preliminary document, MSF International Council, 10 April 1992 (in French)

Extract:

'Annual report', MSF Atlas of Populations in Danger

1. Contents

From the beginning, the council decided that the most powerful approach would be to highlight 10 or so populations. The council also believed that this would avoid the risk of pseudo-universal criteria, which invariably end in failure.

a. Editorial line

Sounding the alarm on around 10 vulnerable populations, the editorial by Médecins Sans Frontières' immediately explains the reasons why these populations were chosen. Does the same hold true for the regions of the world where we don't operate? Another question: where does MSF get the legitimacy to draw a line at the end of a short list of victims – too short out of necessity? It then takes stock of a year characterised by emergencies, in striking contrast to the major international organisations' creation of new units specialising in emergency relief. The report also stresses that it's important to emphasise the specific role played by private relief organisations, etc. In addition, it updates the humanitarian situation in the south, such as the major powers' withdrawal, fragmentation of power and reduced access to victims. Lastly, it discusses the new challenges awaiting independent relief organisations.

b. Populations in Danger

Two content proposals have been presented so far:

- a population-based approach: a chapter with 10 case studies of vulnerable populations scrutinised using standardised criteria. [...]
- a theme-based approach: less powerful, but "safer", broken down by topic based on our five focus areas, i.e. conflicts, displaced persons and refugees, famines, epidemics and disasters). [...]

Neither proposal is completely satisfactory on its own. The first approach uses a restrictive set of analytical criteria (are malnutrition rates a sound basis for comparison? The problem of cumbersome statistics, etc.), while the second approach is less appealing.

The council agreed on a combined approach: a theme-based approach to avoid the 'list of winners' effect created by short information sheets on populations, combined with an article written from a specific perspective. [...]



Minutes of the MSF International Council meeting, 10 April 1992 Directors (in French)

Excerpt:

5. MSF Annual Report [...]

The entire international board believes that this project is very important both to bring attention to populations in distress and to Médecins Sans Frontières' image.

An editorial committee was established:

Editor-in-chief: François Jean [MSF France President's advisor]

Writers: Réginald [Moreels, MSF Belgium President], Jacques de Milliano [MSF Holland General Director] and Rony Brauman [MSF France President]

Editorial secretariat: Anne-Marie Huby [MSF International Communication Officer]

The goal of this editorial committee is to deliver a manuscript. One of the sections (either Belgium or Holland) will handle the later steps (production, revision, etc.).

There is no specific budget; the project will be taken up by the communications budget.

The communications directors will handle the report's publication and MSF International Day.



Minutes of MSF International Council meeting, 15 October 1992 (in English)

Extract:

7. MSF International day 25th November

The report on 'Populations in Danger' is ready. It will be published in English, French and Spanish.

It will be handed to Jacques Delors and Boutros Boutros-Ghali during an official ceremony. Many national events will be organised in every section and our London office will be inaugurated in the presence of Lord Owen, the MSF UK chairman.

The IC discusses the communication approach.

It is decided to put forward Sudan, Yugoslavia, Somalia and Burma and to stress two topics: refugees and access to the victims.



Minutes from MSF France Board of Directors meeting, 4 December 1992 (in French)

Extract:

Populations in Danger

Rony Brauman [MSF France President] presented the Populations in Danger book to UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, French President François Mitterrand and European Commission President Jacques Delors during an official ceremony:

- A press conference held at the UN was favourably received both by the media and the personalities in attendance. The interview with Boutros-Ghali, however, proved to be of little value.

- Mitterrand showed great interest in the refugee issue. The concern expressed by Rony about the Bosnian situation led to advocacy reflecting the official line.
- Delors agreed with MSF's positions on Bosnia and suggested that MSF participate in a working group with the EEC on humanitarian issues.

Rony [Brauman, MSF France President] congratulates the communications staff and Anne-Marie Huby [MSF International Communication Officer] for the enormous amount of work they did promoting the report's release.

The first edition of the report published for the 'international day of the populations in danger' on 25 November 1992 was a success. Therefore, the International Council decided to publish a yearly report.

In 1993, the second edition, titled 'Facing crisis', was published in French, English, Dutch, Italian and German.



Minutes from MSF France Board of Directors meeting, 26 March 1993 (in French)

Extract:

Populations in Danger – François Jean [MSF France President's advisor]

The Editorial Committee developed the first outline for the 1993 Populations in Danger report at a meeting in Brussels. The major theme will focus on United Nations actions and their interventions in crisis situations.

Like last year, the report will consist of two parts:

- the first will address the topic of vulnerable populations. An introduction will provide updates to situations explored in the previous report by discussing new developments.
- in the second part, articles will analyse various international issues, including NGO responses to security problems resulting from increased violence; respect for human rights; international law; a discussion of the media's role in humanitarian emergencies during crises; and the functioning of humanitarian agencies.



Three people played a central role - François Jean, Rony Brauman and I. I think I suggested the annual report. Then François Jean spent a lot of time working on the content. Later, it became the "Populations in Danger" book. The first issue was published in French and English. Subsequent issues were in Italian, German, Dutch and Japanese. "Populations in Danger" was no longer just MSF France, MSF Belgium and MSF Holland - it was the MSF movement.

Dr Alain Destexhe, MSF International General Secretary
1991-1995 (in French)

Over the years, as sales remained low, questions were raised about the usefulness of the report. The defenders of the

project retorted that Populations in Danger was a good tool to express MSF's principles and concerns regarding humanitarian action and that it helped to increase MSF's credibility. Internally, it encouraged the sections to reflect collectively once a year on MSF action.



Minutes from MSF France Board of Directors meeting, 25 March 1994 (in French)

Extract:

The purpose of the MSF books, "Populations in Danger" and 'Face aux Crises'

The following debate took place:

1) Frédéric Laffont and Marcel Roux feel that selling these two books has been a failure. About 8,000 copies of Populations in Danger and 2,700 copies of 'Face aux Crises' have been sold. Doesn't such a wide gap between effort and results prove that MSF is poorly understood (and thus doesn't do a good job explaining itself) and isn't reaching out to the public? The book does, of course, play the very important role of exerting pressure, but the process is more internal than external in nature and the book is expensive (100 francs). Is the product suitable and well distributed? Isn't an annual report enough?

2) Rony B. disagrees that the cost is too high and believes that sales are limited but decent because essay collections like this can be a difficult sell. What's more, success or failure isn't measured by sales but whether publications provide greater credibility (the 'The Humanitarian Crime' pamphlet on Somalia only sold 1,500 copies, but received extensive media coverage):

- response has been limited but significant, with numerous articles and 32 press conferences (international impact),
- the book serves as a reference document and analytical guide for MSF and describes the philosophy behind our work,
- MSF has specific things it wants to stay and it's important for us to express them once a year without the pressure of current events. Without this book, we wouldn't be able to hold the international 'Populations in Danger' day.

The book strengthens MSF's image and network. [...]



Minutes of the MSF International Council meeting, 5 May 1995 (in French)

Extract:

7. Populations in Danger

After three years, it would be interesting to assess the Populations in Danger Day, which is also the day that our annual report is published. This day creates an important bond among us and it's how we clarify our political positions.

We want to emphasize that the book encourages us, once a year, to make time to think and reflect. It is a powerful and intense experience. However, it is not adequately disseminated. Josep noted that it is greatly appreciated in Spain. This annual document should present our political and humanitarian thinking based on the past year's events and, above all, it should be a publication of the international movement.

However, the production of the 1996/1997 edition was particularly difficult, mostly because of the dissension between sections regarding the content and the messages on the Great Lakes of Central Africa crisis.

In January 1997, the International council decided to stop the publication of 'Populations in Danger'.

Instead, a yearly book would be published for a restricted audience that would be the result of an internal process of critical reflection on MSF action. This book could be used as a tool by the communication departments to sensitise a larger audience to the populations in danger issues.



Minutes from MSF International Council meeting, 31 January 1997 (in French)

Extract:

V. Populations in Danger

As just defined, the IC's [International Council] role is to take decisions on the contents of the MSF message and its method of dissemination and, as a result, the future of PID [Populations in Danger].

Marcel Vos [MSF Holland Director of Communication] recaps the problems experienced producing the PID in 1996 and interprets them as follows: a mix of internal planning objectives and external communications; work based on an international consensus; overly diluted responsibilities; [...]

No one wants to repeat this experience and the IC unanimously agrees to the following proposal:

- A book of reflection for a small audience will be published on a regular basis after an internal process of critical analysis of our activities.
- The communications departments will decide how to spread the book's message in order to raise awareness of vulnerable populations among a wider audience (through a day-long event, an exhibition or other methods).

The next PID's theme and responsibility should be determined very soon (Paris already has a proposal). The general directors will hold a conference call within the next two weeks to come up with a joint proposal, which will be submitted to the IC for approval.



Populations in Danger served as an institutional communications tool for calling attention to vulnerable populations, but also for promoting MSF in a major way! When I was international secretary, people felt that this was a Paris thing, always done by the same people, who selected the populations and the order of priority. There were years when some sections were dealing with huge emergencies, but these weren't included in Populations in Danger because Paris wasn't working on them. When it ended in 1997, I imagine it's partly because of the way Zaire had been treated. The sections didn't have very different perspectives on Zaire, but the various players pushed them far apart, with people focusing on the differences.

Dr Jean-Marie Kindermans, MSF International Secretary General 1995-2000, MSF Belgium President 2002-2010, IB member 2011-2013 (in French)

MSF France proposed that the 1998 edition of the book that would replace Population in Danger be dedicated to questions of public health and medical practices.

Eventually, this book was edited by Rony Brauman, the former president of MSF France henceforth Director of Research at the MSF France Foundation and published in French in 20001.



Minutes from MSF International Council Meeting, 1 May 1997 (in English)

Extract:

7) Populations in Danger

A proposal has been made by the French section that this year the book deal with questions of public health and medical practice (epidemics, medical practice in extreme situations, health care and international co-operation, access to health care in rich countries ...). This proposal is endorsed by the executive committee. The CR [restricted Committee] agrees unanimously to this proposal. Rony Brauman will be the editor, and we expect a maximum of inputs from MSF people. The editorial committee will be the executive committee, to avoid last year's difficulties. It is foreseen the book will be published in February 1998. To launch this project, it has first to be approved by more than two-thirds of the IC. This approval will be requested by email.