INTERNATIONAL EMERGENCY SYSTEM "EMERGENCY TEAM" (ET).

Origin and setting-up of the "Emergency team"

July 1994, Goma: a humanitarian catastrophe of unprecedented scope. MSF intervenes massively. This emergency intervention involving different sections, shows that as far as collaboration between MSF sections is concerned, there is still room for improvement. The MSF intervention was strong but could have been more efficient.

October 1995, international meeting in Chantilly, theme: internationalization. The idea is launched to define a way to intervene in an emergency with different sections so as to be able to respond to one of the basic principles of our internationalization: to unite so as to become better, more independent and better able to bring relief to the victims. We thus decided to set up a common dynamic in case of emergencies to pool our resources without falling into uniformity or a superstructure.

A working group has been made up of people, from different sections, with a working experience with MSF and experience in emergency interventions. This group has had to devise the working modalities at the headquarter level for an inter-section emergency intervention.

E.T was born in January 1996, its main objective is to pool our efforts in the field in order to provide more efficient assistance to the populations in need.

We have to keep in mind, though, that for MSF an international dynamic in emergencies exists since 1988. Many joint emergency interventions have been a real success (Armenia, Kurdistan,...).

Some important problems have weakened the operational capacities of MSF during the past years. This has justified the search for a new international approach: E.T.

Functioning mode

The nationalities of the sections and the volunteers are disregarded. Everyone can claim the project under the MSF banner, with no mention of nationality.

The Directors of Operations of all the sections appoints a number of persons to perform an "on call" duty for the emergencies. Today, two persons on the list, from two different sections, are "on call" and in charge of reacting to news of emergencies. This sort of news can also be received from the different sections. They have to follow up on emergencies, see whether they are already taken care of by MSF sections in the field or not and decide whether or not to send an exploratory mission.
They then appoint somebody in Europe to become the "desk manager". Once appointed, the desk manager takes on the management of the emergency. His or her section of origin becomes the "Back Up Section (BUS)". As far as numbers and specialties of persons working on the desk is concerned, each section can organize itself as it sees fit. The main thing is that it is the desk manager who coordinates and has the legitimacy and the authority to lead the programme.

The "Emergency team" is thus a network of people recognized by all the sections and able to take quick decisions regarding the launch of an emergency intervention and its follow-up. ET is not a seventh section. Just as a programme officer has to justify its action towards his peers and his director of operations, the members of ET have to justify their choices and actions to the members of the ET and to the Directors of Operations of all the sections.

The other key element of this network are the heads of missions, chosen between the sections.

The system is based on the trust given to this network by all headquarters and in the principle underlying its functioning.

Nature of the programmes and functioning in the field

ET must intervene in important new emergencies. They are the classical emergency fields of MSF. The Directors of Operations asked ET to be always ready for exploratory missions and on the look-out for information. On the other hand, the intervention of ET must only be considered if it really brings an added value with regard to the interventions that could have been implemented by the different sections on their own.

Finally the programmes must be mainly medical programmes or regarding the survival of people we are working close to. There is no question in getting involved in big supply programmes except if they are vital (water, food, blankets, etc.). In short the action must be consistent with the recommendations made by all the sections in Chantilly in 1995.

Length of an ET mission

In the document outlining the functioning of ET it has been foreseen that an ET mission does not last more than six weeks, a period after which either the intervention stops or is taken over by a specific section.

After six weeks, the head of the mission makes proposals regarding the continuation of the intervention. He defines, together with the desk manager,
which programmes have to be continued and which they propose to reorient or stop.

The members of the ET discuss this, but it is the directors of operations who will decide of the attribution of the programmes. The results of the first operations lead by the ET show that the six week delay must be studied on a case by case basis.

For example it was decided by all that the ET intervention in Senegal and the one in Nigeria would continue as ET after the initial six week period.

First results of the ET interventions

Since the start of E.T in January 1996, 6 interventions have been implemented:
China: Earthquake
Senegal: Cholera epidemic
Great Lakes: Emergency Preparedness
Nigeria: Meningitis Epidemic
Niger: Meningitis Epidemic
Lebanon: Armed Conflict

The first intervention took place after the earthquake in China; it could have started by a blunder because we almost had two distinct interventions. Finally everybody showed his and her will to get together in a common intervention.
A single section could have taken care of the cholera epidemic in Senegal. But the action of the ET allowed us to show up as MSF - with no sections mentioned - which is very important and will allow us in the future to intervene in areas where the mention of a nationality can be sensitive.
The meningitis epidemic in Nigeria allowed us a huge (70 expatriates, 14 nationalities in march) intervention, with teams who were in the field under one MSF banner.
There is of course criticism regarding those interventions but they are often linked to factors independent from the ET.
There are frustrations within the sections not doing the follow-up as Back Up Section to "grasp the essence of" the ongoing mission, to make the section "pulse" with the intervention. We have to try to improve the system.

The problems

It is inevitable that problems with the functioning of ET arise.
It is important is to be able to discuss them in a serene atmosphere.
The China mission showed a problem regarding the rapidity of reaction of the people on call, which led to the confusion with the "on call" systems all sections have. Regarding the Nigeria emergency, it is the concept of the programmes with the choice between a centralized or a modular organization. The exploratory mission of the Great Lakes has seemed to interfere with the already ongoing missions in the field. The coordination mechanisms on the field and at the headquarters level can also be hard to arrange. The choice of one desk manager
and of a sole coordinator may also be really frustrating for the other desk managers and the other coordinators.

Finances and ET

Financial management at MSF becomes more and more complicated, certainly with regard to the structures MSF has to function with at the moment - 19 centers (Sections and Delegate Offices) generate funds!

So as to guarantee adequate reactivity when an emergency arises, it is important for MSF to have "own funds". The sections agreed to provide ET with the funds necessary for the start of an operation.

An agreement has also be found to determine the proportion of "private funds" as opposed to "institutional funds" to be foreseen in emergency interventions.

What still remains to be defined is how the different sections will be able to show the financial balance of the ET interventions in their annual activity report.

ET and internationalization

It is important to keep in mind that internationalization is not the sole "property" of ET which is only a tool in this construction. We have to develop other ideas, other initiatives as far as internationalization is concerned at headquarters level and in the field. In this process of internationalization, ET is only a step along the way, albeit an important one.