

## **Case Study of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF)**

This case study will present a thorough research and assessment on the INGO, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), as well as reflect on the problems the organization faces while acting in the international scene. To do so, this paper is constructed by two major points. The first one presents an overview and evaluation of the institution, providing in-depth information such as background history, its objectives and missions, the origins of its funding, amongst other relevant details. On the other hand, the second section of this piece aims to critically examine the challenges that MSF often encounters when providing “borderless” humanitarian aid. For instance, governments often impose obstructions to the actions of the organization. Adding to that, IR scholars question the role of INGOs, and whether these contribute to better the relations between nations. Shining light on the missions of North-Korea (1995-1998) and the Mediterranean Refugee Crisis, this paper aims to grasp a clearer perception of both the limits and the contributions of the group in the international arena. The term NGO is an abbreviation for Non-Governmental Organization. Currently, there is still a lack of an agreed-upon definition for NGO. However, it usually refers to a non-profit institution, with a social agenda, working independently from the government. According to the My World Abroad website, “(...) more than half of French NGOs are large: their annual budgets exceed one million euros (...)” (Les ONG françaises). Respectively, some of the biggest French NGOs are Handicap International, Action Contre la Faim, Médecins du monde, and MSF. Thus, to what concerns the field of intervention: health, rural development, education; as well as gender equality, indigenous people’s rights and climate change seem to be high-priority issues (Les ONG françaises). As has been stated previously, MSF upholds a great position amongst its fellow French NGOs. The organization dedicated to providing emergency medical assistance to populations whose health is threatened in a crisis first came to life on 12 December 1971 and has grown to be a worldwide movement.

As explained in the MSF webpage, the organization was founded approximately 50 years ago. The founding members were French medics and journalists, being that some of them had had prior experience working in the Red Cross, and others were linked to the medical journal *Tonus* (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.). The group has as its main objectives the provision of medical support and services for populations that live in precarious medical situations, caused by the exclusion of care, epidemics, armed conflicts and even pandemics. Accordingly, MSF offers a wide range of help, from surgeries to consultations, as well as psychological, medical and nutritional care (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.). So far, the INGO has been performing an outstanding job in achieving its claimed goals. After helping countless populations through food crisis, as was the case for Cambodia in 1980, and Ethiopia in 1985; as well as armed conflicts, like the Rwandan genocide in 1994; the organization was granted the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999. The award was one of the biggest achievements of the organization (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.). The 900,000 euros received from the Nobel were used in the Campaign for Access to Essential Medicines (CAME) launched that same year. The movement is still to this day active and is responsible for the production of drugs that were discontinued, hoping to make them more accessible (Médecins Sans Frontières,

n.d.). Another point that measures the success of the group is their statistics. Currently, MSF is present in more than 70 countries across the globe; counts 41.000 staff members and 25 independent associations; not to mention its resources amounted to 414.4 million euros in 2019 alone (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.).

Importantly, MSF teams are also expected to follow the same charter of values to bring the best assistance to people. Having that in mind, principles such as impartiality, the spirit of neutrality, and medical ethics seem to define the activities of the organization. When referring to impartiality, it implies that aid should be primarily given to those in most immediate danger, without discrimination. Besides, to what concerns the neutrality aspect, this means one should not take sides, especially in armed conflicts. Instead, the institution chooses to “bear witness” and to “publicly denounce and criticize obstacles to its humanitarian assistance and breaches of international conventions” (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.). Following these values seems to be rather important for the institution, being that records on the group’s activities are available online, for the sake of transparency. Yet, ethical dilemmas and even scandals sometimes impose obstacles and weaken the INGO reputation. To give an illustration, in 2017 MSF fired 19 people for sexual abuse. Under a statement released by the Paris-based group, in 2017 alone 146 complaints were filed, 40 of those were found to be allegations concerning sexual harassment, and 24 cases lead to an investigation (Chrisafis, 2018). The Oxfam accusations were linked with the Haiti mission in 2010 and denounced the use of local prostitutes by aid workers at the charity organization. Claims also pointed out that it was possible to exchange medication for sexual activities (Chrisafis, 2018). In response to the scandal, MSF has also raised awareness campaigns and encouraged staff to denounce situations of the sort, by creating an email for that specific purpose (Jacob, 2018). Due to the quick action of the institution condemning such violations, it becomes clear the commitment of MSF to the ethics surrounding humanitarian intervention. Lastly, financial autonomy is another principle MSF takes pride in. As reported in 2019, 99.1% of their funding was private (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.). Appropriately, financial clarity is taken quite seriously. Consequently, the INGO publishes detailed reports regarding the origin of their funds and where they are being invested every year (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.).

Provided all the insight regarding Medics Without Borders, it is pertinent to reflect on the role of the INGO in the international scene. Their action has a positive impact worldwide, but it is also marked by several limits and conditions. On one hand, MSF has an extensive platform that allows it to call attention to humanitarian crisis, injustices and so on. This platform is constituted by social media accounts, namely Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok, LinkedIn, and there is a noticeable intent to reach the international community by using the English language in these channels. On top of the massive following these pages have, their website and awareness campaigns are also used to raise consciousness on multiple topics. For instance, currently, MSF’s social media is devoted to shining light on the last 10 years of war in Syria. In addition, there is also a section on their page, called “Speaking Out”, where one can find podcasts, case studies and even documentaries on multiple emergency cases over the years (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.). Undoubtedly, MSF has great power when it comes to getting media attention, and consequently bringing the international community together. With all this exposure, MSF can contribute to more transparency in international relations, as

well as give a voice to those communities who suffer at the hands of their governments or those neglected by them. A great example to sustain this argument is the speech of acceptance for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999. The INGO seized the event to appeal to the Ambassador of Russia, to stop the bombardments over the innocent people of Chechnya. In the same speech, it is also said that although internal conflicts are an issue of the states, whenever human rights are violated and war crimes committed, there is a shared responsibility within the international community to act on it (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.). These sorts of statements emphasize the organization's attempt to "bear witness" and use their platform for awareness purposes.

Notwithstanding their "rebellious" humanitarianism, there are barriers the organization faces to deliver its aid. Since "there are no regulations under international law governing the establishment, requirements, and the legal status of NGOs" (Martens, 2003), one might assume that NGOs are above all states and have total freedom to operate in the international space. This is a misconception. It is not uncommon for MSF to have their missions disrupted by national governments or struggling to sustain critical situations by itself, as the world chooses to turn a blind eye on them. For this reason, the so proclaimed "borderless" movement of the MSF institution might not be as limitless as it comes across. To prove the above-stated point, the mission in North Korea and the Mediterranean Refugee Crisis are quite pertinent. In the first case, MSF had an international team working in North-Korea, from 1995 to 1998, providing epidemiological monitoring of diarrhoea, delivering medicines, and giving support to improve nutritional therapeutic care to malnourished children. Throughout their stay in the country MSF staff operated under tight surveillance of the North-Korean government (Médecins sans Frontières, 2014). The activities of the group were highly conditioned by the national authorities, that insisted priority was given to members considered useful to the regime (Médecins sans Frontières, 2014). Also, rumours about a famine situation and terrible health care conditions in the country started to emerge. Soon after, in August 1998, the North Korean authorities told MSF that their aid would only be accepted, if they imported basic materials, and let the regime handle their distribution. Being that such terms did not align with the principles of a medical humanitarian organisation, MSF was forced to withdraw from the country (Médecins sans Frontières, 2014). In the end, the North-Korean government is solely responsible for MSF's abandonment of the nation. The entity did not allow the organization to assist them ethically and used the international aid as a mean to reinforce the totalitarian regime oppressing the population. Another situation that proves the sovereign limits of the organization is the Mediterranean refugee crisis. In 2018, an MSF boat carrying more than 600 refugees was refused by Malta and Italy. The boat was then later received in Spain. However, the Italian authorities pressured for the ship to have their registration cancelled by Panama, which eventually happened in December of 2018. Following this action, the INGO was forced to terminate their rescue mission (Médecins Sans Frontières, n.d.). Once again, the influence of MSF and these sorts of organizations is limited. Despite having a great platform to call upon the international community, this does not automatically mean that needed help will be indeed provided, or that nations will come together when faced with emergencies.

In conclusion, MSF has been doing a great job achieving its objectives. According to their web page they have now reached 10.8 million consultations all around the world; treated 2.6 million cases of Malaria and assisted 329,900 births (Médecins Sans

Frontières, n.d.). Also, the group has stayed devoted to their values, constantly denouncing violations of human rights and contributing to better international transparency. All reports of activities and financial resources are available for the public eyes as well. Their platforms are always used to raise awareness and seek donations. All around, one can access the performance of the organization as very positive and impactful. Yet, it is crucial to remember that despite all the great actions and missions carried out by the INGO, the authority of this entity is sometimes limited. As the first principle of Realism highlights, NGOs are non-actors in international relations, as opposed to the Nation States, as a result, their power ends up being restricted. These sovereign limits were demonstrated when reflecting on the North Korean mission and the Mediterranean Refugee Crisis. In the end, the borderless act of the group is after all still conditioned by national governments, who can put an end to their missions, or heavily obstruct them. Finally, when it comes to the international scene, MSF has carried out impressive work under oftentimes poor conditions, and limitations. Their presence is undoubtedly beneficial not only to the communities it integrates but also to better international cooperation and dialogues.

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