

FROM MINI-GENERAL ASSEMBLY (MINI-GAS) TO FIELD ASSOCIATIVE DEBATES (FADS)

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 the 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:

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, Jean-Benoît Burrion, Pierre Harzé + 3 others chosen from the executive board.



Minutes from the MSF Belgium Board 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 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 (in 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 1.D 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-GAs to attend the General Assembly in Brussels.

 **Minutes** from the MSF Belgium Board Meeting, 3 November 1993 (in 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 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 2, 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 (in French).

Extract:

Point 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; see document attached (appendix 2).

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 the 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, m[ini] AGs 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:

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.

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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 GAs;
4. Coordination of organisation should come from the International office in cooperation with individual section Boards.
5. 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).

6. 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.

7. Recommendations should be formulated to give direction to and initiate useful discussions at the General Assemblies.
8. After the mini AGs, IC members will make a selection and decide on the resolutions to be discussed at General Assembly.
9. 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 the 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 GAs] [...] 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 the MSF International Council Meeting, 27 November 1999 (in English and French).

Extract:

Item 8: MAGs [Mini GAs]

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-GAsMs are to be held in most cases at the national level with all sections present, rather than at the regional level.

In 2000, the MSF Belgium, MSF Spain and MSF Luxembourg Mini AG voted on motions for the organisation of an extraordinary international general assembly (Chantilly III), in order to define the orientation of MSF's internationalisation process.

 **Minutes** from the MSF International Council Meeting, 10-11 June 2000 (in English).

Extract:

Motions from the general assemblies were reviewed, and the following accepted: [...] The second issue raised related to the organisation of an extraordinary international general assembly to be known as Chantilly III in order to define the orientation of the internationalisation process of MSF (raised by the Belgian, Spanish, and Luxembourg GAs). Several points were raised:

- The fact that this motion appeared at all seemed to indicate a lack of communication on the progress made on the internationalisation front. It therefore, appears necessary to not only consolidate the present mechanisms but also to improve the flow of information within the movement explaining what these mechanisms are and the progress that is being made.
- This appears to be a technical solution to a problem that is not well defined. Previous Chantilly meetings were in response to acute crises within the movement, and were organised accordingly.
- The organisation of such an event would require an enormous investment in terms of resources, work, and finances.
- The aim of such an event does not appear to be very clear at this point.
- It is recognised that there is a demand for such an event (stemming from the GA that presented this motion) and that there needs to be an official response to this request.
- The system of presenting motions to the IC was mentioned: motions should be ideas for consideration, and if agreed, to be passed to the executive.

The following motion was presented:

Motion: The IC suggests that the virtual space be used for debate, and that where necessary, the MAGs [mini general assemblies] give their input on the internationalisation process. Furthermore,

if a future meeting is proposed, the proposal will be carefully reviewed.

Outcome: 16 in favour, abstentions (MSF B[elgium] and MSF L[uxembourg]).

In 2005, the mini general assembly participants emphasised that effective access to association membership was still hampered by lack of information and fee costs. They issued motions asking for diversification of staff in terms of origin and local staff empowerment.

 Mini-GAs **Synthesis**, Spring 2005 (in English, edited).

Extract:

Operating as an association

For MSF to efficiently function as an association, a number of mini-GAs feel that everyone should be given the right to become a member and this is not the case for several reasons:

- In some sections, local staff cannot become members or conditions are put to become a member (Cameroon, Bolivia). In particular, the membership fee should be adapted to national cost of living (Bolivia).
- Little information is made available at field level regarding the associative functioning (Guatemala, Nigeria, Ethiopia). The associative should communicate more and translate their tools into local languages, and local staff should be more involved/informed (Guatemala, etc). [...]

Motions [...]

Sudan North

Motion 4


In recruitment, take steps to accelerate diversification of staff in terms of origin/culture [...]

Motion 5

Take further action to ensure empowerment of local staff: in terms of

- responsibilities
- equal opportunities to work internationally
- training

In November 2005, the international council agreed that sections should organise La Mancha-related debates in the field and headquarters. Consequently, in 2006 FADs were mostly dedicated to the La Mancha topics.

 **Minutes** from the MSF International Council Meeting, 26-27 November 2005 (in English).

Extract:

Resolution on field/sections debates - Decision:

The IC agreed on the organisation of La Mancha-related debates at both field and section levels. The IC also agreed that the ICB develops, in the coming two weeks, one- to two-page summary

describing the debate and where the different arguments lie within MSF on each topic.

In June 2006, building on a review of the mini-GAs, the international council decided to reorganise their process. They were to include two days of debate, one on international issues set up by the international council, the other on national issues organised by national boards. The mini-GAs became 'Field Associative Debates' (FADs).



Mini-GA Review for IC discussion – June 2006 (in English, edited).

Extract:

MAIN PROBLEMS

1. On the aim and the outcomes/expectations

a) Lack of clarity on mini-GA status and objectives:

The fact that there is no common definition of what a mini-GA is nor a clear view of what is expected from the field leads to conflicting objectives and confusion.

The IC in November 1998 recommended that the field should be leading the agenda of the mini-GA with the possibility of a limited number of subjects directed from the IC. In reality, mini-GAs often address a broader diversity of topics:

- Operational issues (taking the opportunity of the different sections present to share information and experience on the different projects implemented, on the strategies, etc.).
- Topics proposed by national associations (either discussed with section staff prior to the mini-GA or included in the mini-GA agenda – i.e. discussed therefore by all participants including those from other sections).
- More cross-sectional associative topics proposed by the IC.

These forums therefore end up in a mix of operational/technical and associative meetings, the balance between the two components varying from one mini-GA to the other.

On the associative value, the very wording 'mini-GA' suggests that this forum/event is a replication of the GA at field level with a direct impact on the GA (feeding the GA debate, giving voice to the field prior to the GA, etc.). And this probably was the intention when they were set up. This, however, is somehow misleading as non-members also participate and vote on motions and recommendations. But at the same time, it cannot only be attended by members as it would then exclude most if not all national staff as well as a number of expatriates including sometimes heads of mission – and therefore go against the intention set out by the IC in November 1998.

b) Lack of clarity on how to deal with the outcomes of the mini-GAs:

• Lack of clarity on the expectations :

o Lack of clear definition of 'motions' and 'recommendations': the 1998 IC recommendations do not clarify the ambiguity by using indistinguishably either 'motion', 'recommendations' or 'resolutions'. As mini-GAs are inter-sectional, one section cannot

impose one definition on the others. But is it the IC's responsibility to impose a definition on national associations? In addition, does the IC expect motions from the mini-GAs, that can in no way be binding to the international association (IC), as they should not be for the national associations when voted by non-members or a majority of members of another national association for example?

o -> Is it realistic (or democratic) for motions from mini-GAs to be binding for the IC or for national AGMs? For some sections, one of the main problems is the feedback to the general assemblies: how to differentiate between IC topics, national association topics and topics that are proposed by the participants of the mini-GAs (which ones should go the GAs?). How to deal with so many motions? How to deal with badly formulated motions? In some sections, the problem is addressed by a 'mini-GA motion committee' which is overwhelmed by the number of motions. In another section, this is not perceived as a problem as all mini-GA motions are discussed by heads of mission who consolidate them before they are presented at the GA (thus making the link between the mini-GAs and the GA). Along with this, is the question of the status of the mini-GA motions: as they are somehow debated at IC level, is it necessary to also discuss them at the GAs? What is the status of a motion accepted by one GA and rejected by another? Consolidating similar motions at association level means that depending on the section, inter-sectional mini-GAs receive different treatment in different OCs.

o Along the same lines, what are the definition and the status of a mini-GA recommendation?

• Follow-up and feedback to the field

o At national association level (after the GAs): At least two sections raised the difficulty of giving feedback to the field of the mini-GA discussions at the GA.

o At IO level: The syntheses/summaries organised by the IO are too long and there is a strong request, made also at the association officers' meeting, to make them more attractive, more practical and useful to the field.

o On the follow-up at IC level: Feedback to the field on the steps taken or decisions made by the IC further to mini-GAs is either very late or non-existent, contributing to the feeling that mini-GAs are not followed in effect and are useless. (Example of the IC resolution on abortion as a direct outcome of the 2004 mini-GA on women's health.) The reality is that, even if there is an IC resolution as a direct outcome of the mini-GA, the link is not made obvious at field level. Sending the minutes of the IC meeting to the field is not enough -> More should be done by both IC and national associations/sections to connect the resolution with the mini-GA, thus adding value to the mini-GA.

2. Practical problems (...)

c) Timeframe as proposed by Nov 1998 IC is impossible

The schedule of the mini-GA is a problem. Indeed mini-GAs are scheduled between late February and mid-May, most of them taking place in beginning of March and end of April. The dates of mini-GAs are decided at field level by heads of mission, but are pretty much influenced by the date the supporting documents are sent to the board assistants and then to the field. The fact that supporting documents are delivered late by the IO obviously has an impact on the late schedule of the mini-GA (even if heads of mission could plan the mini-GA without having the info package, the reality is that it does not).

The later the mini-GAs are organised the more difficult it is to have the international synthesis/summary done in a timely manner to allow prior discussion at IC level – as recommended by the IC in November 1998 (even electronically) – before the GA of at least the operational centres (the first one being mid-May).

Two recommendations re schedule of mini-GAs and reporting from the field:

- Have supporting documents from the IO ready and sent earlier and sensitise heads of mission to organise mini-GAs no later than mid-April at the latest. Mini-GAs could start earlier (February).
- Sensitise heads of mission and board members participating to send reports from the field as soon as possible after the mini-GAs, and no later than end of April to allow feedback at GA.

d) Supporting documents:

General feedback is that supporting documents from the IO are too long, too complicated and difficult to use. Several recommendations:

- Documents should be short, simple and easy-to-use
- Documents from IO should be sent systematically, along with a letter from the section president, backing up the letter of the ICP as a way to further motivate the people in the field, HQ and board levels to focus on mini-GAs.

c) Participation of board members

Participation of board members mainly depends on:

- Motivation and individual interest in mini-GAs.
- Availability: Mini-GAs are not really planned ahead while presidents/board members would need planning ahead to fit mini-GAs in their agenda -> big headache to harmonise both field schedule and board members' constraints.
- Others: language issue, visa problems, etc.

Participation of board members is difficult to coordinate at IO level, resulting in no board presence in some mini-GAs while others have two or more board members present, although participation of board members is considered as key in some sections -> it impacts on the dynamics of the mini-GAs and on the motivation of participants.

d) Participation of national staff

Even if the will is there in theory (and if national staff are eager to participate), this one is pretty unclear in practice. Participation of national staff depends on the missions as no section has a specific guideline on that.

Some raise the issue of cost (although one could argue that having an expatriate or national staff would probably cost the same, if not more [for international staff]), not to question the participation of national staff as such, but rather over how to organise this participation, in particular in countries where there is a lot of national staff: not all can participate, therefore do we set criteria to select those participating (and if so, what should these be?) or do we organise pre-mini-GAs at project level to select delegates to mini-GAs. It seems that there are some selection criteria in some field missions, but the decision is basically left to the organisers in the field (heads of mission).

e) Who at field level is responsible for organising mini-GAs -> raising the question of the role of the head of mission (cf. also debate at the association officers meeting)

Mini-GAs are not systematically organised in all countries. Among the reasons identified are:

- The availability of staff in the projects, conjectural reasons can also explain the absence of mini-GAs in some countries: HR problems at the time of the mini-GAs, emergency crises that arise (Darfur in 2004, Niger in 2005), etc.
- In some countries, the fact that there is only one section running a small project can also explain the absence of mini-GAs (cost, interest, availability, etc.).
- Motivation of the heads of mission to organise a Mini-GA and the turnover of expatriate staff (continuity issue).

The last point raises the broader question of the ambiguity of the role of the heads of mission in animating the associative life at field level. For some sections, the head of mission is the key person to organise the mini-GA and be the relay for the associative life in the field (this is integrated in the head of mission's terms of reference). But, not all heads of mission are members of the association (isn't this a contradiction in terms?). In addition, heads of mission are the representatives of the executive at field level, therefore theoretically holding two caps (is this compatible)?

OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

1. The mini-La Mancha experience:

Feedback from the mini-La Mancha in the field early 2006 are rather positive. When looking at what made them work, the following was mentioned:

- Clear, immediate and concrete objective.
- Clear process and clear use of the feedback (direct outcome with the perspective of the Luxembourg conference). And it was made clear that no motions or recommendations were expected -> was presented as a 'consultation process'.
- Clear schedule.
- Was built on momentum.
- No interference with other topics (coming from the national associations).

2. 'Keep the mini-GA'...

This is a commonly expressed request and the reasons given to keep them are multiple:

- Unique associative space in the field -> 'a barometer of the associative life in the field'.
- The only time people can realise we are an international movement and they can feel they are part of it -> a way to materialise a concept (meaning of the associative life).
- The only time for all field people to realise they work for an association and they are part of it -> only direct contact between the association and the field (via board members even if there is not always a board member participating).
- Unique time in the year when all expats (from all sections) are together -> inter-sectional dimension.
- Even if they are expensive, and are hard to organise, they are owned by the field and have become a 'habit', a 'tradition'.
- Privileged opportunity to explain to the staff (national staff) what MSF is (its values, its identity) and for some sections how to become a member and encourage membership.
- One particular topic/issue discussed by all field missions allowing for an important associative impetus.
- They give an opportunity and legitimacy to board members to visit the field and meet the teams, etc.

3. '... But reform/improve them'

Many suggested using the mini-La Mancha as a model to reform the mini-GAs.

a. Set clear objectives and clarify expectations (national and international levels)

- Change the name.
- Mini-GAs should be an associative forum first -> operational/technical and associative issues should be better differentiated -> clear space for the associative with no executive/operational interference -> focus on cross-sectional associative topics (identity of MSF) -> allow for other forums to deal with operational issues and exchange information between projects at country level.
- Be clear on the expectations: what outcomes (motions, recommendations) and on how they are going to be dealt with both by national associations and IC: clarify what is an issue for the 'national AGMs' and what is an issue for the IC, and thus who should discuss and vote on a particular issue.
 - o Either make it clear that no motions/resolutions are expected (-> consultative to get a poll of opinion on a particular question – as for mini-La Mancha)
 - o Or set up an international mini-GA committee (IC, IO?) to produce common outcomes to be debated at the GAs (including proposed motions, etc)
- Guidelines: there should be some kind of international 'guidelines' – focusing on what MSF is, what values, principles guide the movement, what international structure – rather than documents explaining how to become a member as criteria vary from one section to the other and create confusion.

b. Flexibility, spontaneity and continuity: develop something lighter and more frequent

At least three sections mentioned this as a path to explore. The objective would be to make the associative spirit come alive at field level (or even at project level) in the long run and therefore develop a concept that would be less formal, more spontaneous and more deeply anchored in the field life and the local realities -> i.e. a less top-down approach and one that is more integrated so as to keep the associative dynamic up throughout the year and not only on the occasion of a single event.

To make it a reality:

- Involvement of board members: one section thinking of having each board members following up with one project for a year and working at the vitalisation of the associative life in this particular project -> through privileged contacts with members of the association present in the project – including national staff – rather than heads of mission.
- 'Associative groups' or associative relay at field level: two sections thinking of identifying either individual members (including national staff) or groups of members to dynamise the associative life and animate associative debates at field level. This would include organising mini-GAs (making them less of a top-down approach – coming from the HQ or the heads of mission perceived more as a relay of the executive than the associative). That way, a mini-GA could just be a pretext to constitute these groups, make them a reality to go ahead and organise other associative 'events' at field level.
- One head of mission in each country is designated responsible by the IC (IO) for 'international associative debates' and perhaps also for 'international cooperation'.

c. Change the structure to clarify the process, outcomes and follow-up

The idea would be to organise tiered mini-GAs in order to better differentiate between operational, national and international topics, outcomes and follow-up:

- One day or one part specifically on section/national topics: gathering only national members who would report directly to their board.
- One day or part specifically on operational/technical issues: gathering participants from all sections present in a given country who would report directly to operations/medical directors.
- One day specifically on cross-sectional associative topics: also gathering participants from all sections present in a given country who would report directly to the IC.

Conclusion:

The mini-GAs are only a small part of a broader debate and a bigger challenge. Reforming them will only be useful if integrated in the reflection engaged with La Mancha on the dynamisation of the associative life and inclusion of national staff.



Minutes from the MSF International Council Meeting, 24-25 June 2006, Athens (in English).

Extract:

• Mini AG – Field associative debates

Following the request of the IC in November 2005, the IO conducted a review of the Mini AG which describes the issues and identifies a number of challenges (timing, objectives and expectations of the Mini AG, mix of issues discussed at the Mini AG, etc.). Feedback on the Mini La Mancha debates organised before the conference in Luxembourg were rather positive: it is felt important to build on this momentum to reform the Mini AG. [...]

IC decision on further steps:

The IC acknowledged that the Mini AG / field associative debates are:

- A way of invigorating the associative involvement and meaningful membership
- A tool of accountability of the IC to the members of MSF associations and the field
- At national level a tool to prepare for the national AGMs

The name is changed to '*Field Associative Debates*'.

The structure will comprise two different segments

- One day on international issues / topics -> IC in charge
- One day on national issues / topics -> national boards in charge

The IC also agreed that the schedule of the Field Associative Debates should be reviewed for these debates to take place earlier in the year to allow timely feedback to the AGMs.

Over the following years, both the international council and the FAD participants remained unsatisfied with the outcomes of the FADs. The usefulness of these events, which require significant investment every year, was questioned. Motions were seen by the IC as more executive than associative by nature while the FAD participants deplored the lack of feedback on their outcomes from one year to the next.

In 2008 the IC took a series of measures to strengthen the link between the FADs and the executive and improve the channelling and feedback on the motions.



Minutes from the MSF International Council Meeting, 28 June 2008 (in English, edited).

Update from International Associative Coordinator Michalis Fotiadis
FAD

[...] The feedback on the outcomes of the FAD will be provided to the field via next newsletter that will contain a couple of interviews with one DirMed [Medical Director] and one DirOp [Director of Operations].

It is advisable to work on a better framework for the discussions in FAD. The quality of reporting is not adequate; however, maybe the framework has to be provided, and then we can expect more structured outcomes. This year the topic should have been linked with MSF reality and concern and should have been DNDi and for next year it could be Access Campaign. Frame the issue/question in such a way that it will be a useful debate. It is a huge challenge to find the right topic. The topic should be linked with the agenda of the IC, and in this way we will have the input from the field. There is still no clear understanding of the motion and its procedure. It might create the frustration when a motion coming from a field is discussed and approved at the partner sections GA. Though coming to the OC [Operational Centre] board/GA is not approved.

Once again, most of the motions coming from the field are executive matters and OC in general is the one who could take proper action with regards to this motion.

A reflection on MSF associative life in the field is needed. The FADs are important and the ideas coming from the field are rich source for MSF; however, we have to find ways to address new ways of associative life, different groups are being established and how can we stimulate discussions in the field for the benefits of MSF operations. It is high time to discuss the associative structure of MSF in general, which was already discussed earlier at the IC today.

Debates should be accompanying the decision-making process of MSF, something which is linked to MSF real life concerns. It will be important that the IC presidents discuss the proposed ideas for the 2009 FAD and discuss them not only with their board, but as well with the executive team – this way we will have really operational debate, which will be a counter balance. The IC members will submit their proposal to the International Associative Coordinator by 30 September.

Michalis is requesting that IC presidents identify one board member who will follow the associative issues from the board point of view and will work in close collaboration with the national associative coordinators/officers. This is explained by a high turnover of the national associative coordinators. Some sections have three people fostering the associative life and others do not have even a board assistant or coordinator. [...]

1. The IC requests that the outcomes of the 2008 FAD on innovation be shared with the appropriate executive platforms (acknowledging that Dir Med and HR already work on them) and ask the IO to provide a feedback to the IC on the subsequent decisions made by these executive platforms.

2. Topics for 2009: each board will send its choice to the International Associative Coordinator by the end of September so as to finalise the selection of the 2009 topic for FAD.

3. The IC welcomes the idea of creating a Working Group on associative membership.

4. The IC agrees to provide the International Associative coordinator with the names of the board members who will join this Working Group and reinforce the Association Coordinator's international network.



Minutes from the MSF International Council Meeting, 29 November 2008 (in English).

Extract:

FAD 2008:

The main complaint from the field re the FAD process is the lack of decent feedback on the outcomes of the FAD of previous years. The field teams question whether their voice was/is heard at international/GA level. The outcome of FAD 2008 show great variance of the opinions and orientations on what MSF is, and we have to acknowledge, due to the turnover of our international teams and the lack of information generally provided to our national staff, that explaining the basic core of MSF's social mission and principles is something to be done regularly. [...] The FAD has to be linked with the operational challenges and needs of the movement.

In order to improve the feedback to the field, each board member participating in the FADs, should be able to present the outcomes of the FAD of the previous year.

The IC thanks the international associative coordinator (IAC) for the synthesis presented and expects that the feedback of the 2008 FAD will be an integral part of the FAD 2009 package.

In April 2009, the participants at field associative debates in India, most of them working in OCA missions, voted on a motion calling for MSF sections and operational centres to encourage the development of an MSF India trust to become an active member of the movement by the 2010 FADS.

Eventually, MSF SARA [South Asia Regional Association] was created by MSF national staff members in India and Southeast Asia in 2012 and was officially recognized as an institutional member of the MSF movement by the International General Assembly in 2014.



Minutes from the MSF United Kingdom Board Meeting, 17 April 2009 (in English).

Extract:

Field Associative Debate (FAD) feedback:

India

An overview of the India FAD was given by FS [Frances Stevenson] and will be further supported by her report. One motion raised: The India FAD calls on the MSF sections and OC [Operational Centre] to support and encourage the development of an MSF India Trust to become an active member of the movement by the 2010 FADS.