

BACKGROUND

The “New Era of Working with Community Organisations” project focuses on how MSF engages with Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and how their capacity can be strengthened in ways that last beyond MSF’s presence. Initially funded by the Transformational Investment Capacity (TIC), since mid-2025 it has been fully absorbed into the Operational Support Unit in MSF Southern Africa.

The project began in 2021 to address a long-standing challenge in MSF’s operational model: what happens to communities when MSF leaves? The idea emerged for a project focused on institutional strengthening of CBOs to ensure continuity of care, advocacy, and community presence beyond the lifespan of an MSF project. Over time, the project’s focus evolved towards supporting CBOs to become operational, confident, and capable on their own terms, regardless of whether their activities overlap with MSF’s.





This formative evaluation sought to document the evolution of the project and explore its added value, relevance and contribution after nearly four years of implementation. The findings aim to inform the future direction of the project, including its potential expansion into emergency contexts, and contribute to broader learning within MSF about community engagement (CE).

HOW DID THE PROJECT WORK?

The project began engaging with CBOs in contexts where MSF projects were closing and later expanded into MSF projects that were mid-cycle or still taking shape—testing and refining approaches to partnership and capacity strengthening.

The project’s central working method is accompaniment, occurring at two levels: 1) the TIC project team offers direct accompaniment to CBOs—providing governance tools, financial and administrative coaching, thematic workshops, etc. 2) MSF project staff coordinate with and provide day-to-day accompaniment to CBOs with support from the TIC project team.

METHODOLOGY

-  Mixed Methods Approach
-  Desk review
-  Perception survey to 20 CBOs (55% response rate)
-  Remote interviews with MSF management, project coordinators, and partner representatives
-  Exposure visits (South Africa and Mozambique)

WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNED?

- **The TIC project fills a critical gap, demonstrating MSF’s capacity for meaningful community engagement.** CBOs reported increased confidence, stronger planning, leadership, and ability to advocate for their communities, while MSF staff noted shifts towards new mindsets and more collaborative, mentoring-oriented practices.
- **The accompaniment model achieves more than any toolkit, but requires more deliberate, creative documentation.** Its strength lay in regular conversations, co-designed tools, and hands-on support navigating CBO dynamics - learning that must be captured without reducing it to static guidance.
- **Staff showed strong willingness and capacity to engage — but also a need for clearer guidance and continued accompaniment.** Many were already experimenting with connectors, networks, and more relational approaches, yet also expressed a real need for support, structure, and safe space to learn.
- **The CBO capacity assessment tool developed by the TIC project is limited by its focus on formalisation; real capacity building has a broader scope.** The tool is useful but reflects a formal NGO-type model. It does not always match how communities organise, especially where informal networks, survivor groups, etc. play central roles.
- **Sustainable handover requires “future-proofing” projects, rather than transferring MSF’s model. The TIC project knows this but sometimes reverts to old habits.** The project shifts the question from: “Can the community sustain the MSF project?” to “What does MSF need to become in order to leave something meaningful behind?” The challenge is how to adapt MSF’s intervention architecture to work more closely with an “ecosystem” of community actors, even when operational pressures push teams towards conventional service handover.
- **MSF Ubuntu creates the right moment for the project’s evolution:** Its focus on power, participation, and adaptation aligns strongly with the project’s approach. The project needs to evolve from implementer to advisor (helping teams analyse options), promoter (connecting champions and making good practice visible) and sense-maker (interpreting patterns across contexts).
- **Low uptake in emergencies comes from a misconception that CE is long-term formalisation, rather than practical, fast, ecosystem-based work.** When equated with building organisations, CE seems irrelevant or impossible in emergencies. Yet, practical approaches such as mapping connectors, strengthening alert networks, etc. are entirely feasible in crises, and the TIC project can support this.