



# EVALUATION OF MSF INTERSECTIONAL COMMS POOL

SEPTEMBER 2017

SHORT VERSION

This publication was produced at the request of Dircom and the Steering Committee for the intersectional Comms Pool. It was prepared independently by *Kristen Bègue*.

## DISCLAIMER

The author's views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of **Médecins sans Frontières** or the Stockholm Evaluation Unit.

# INTRODUCTION

**\*This is an abbreviated version of the original report\***

Discussions about creating a single (intersectional) pool of international field staff with communication profiles started in 2011 and materialized in 2014-2015, driven by MSF communications department.<sup>1</sup> The main rationale triggering those discussions was the difficulty to recruit and retain competent communication professionals for field positions, as well as the willingness to invest in Field Comms capacity and serve field operations better.

Studies commissioned from 2012 to 2014<sup>2</sup> by the International platform of the Communication Directors (Dircom) suggested the single pool management option as one of the solutions. The pool would serve all 5 OCs' needs in terms of Field Comms staff, which would mean an overview of all positions and more opportunities for assignments for international field staff, instead of each OC managing its own Field Comms.<sup>3</sup> The decision was taken to move forward and a Steering Committee (SC) was set up to develop the new system.

There have been various proposals about how and where a single pool could be managed<sup>4</sup> and it was finally decided to locate it in a sizeable partner section, with a Communication Director willing to support the Intersectional Comms Pool Manager (PM) especially during the launch and pilot phase of the initiative, with access to an interesting HR market and with existing HR capacity. MSF UK (through its Dircom) was interested in the role and met the criteria, and was finally chosen to host the pool for a pilot period (set to 6 months), following a decision from IDRH and DirCom5. The pool officially started mid-2015 with the PM (from mid-June 2015) based in the London office. This was an existing position and post-holder, which was seconded by OCA for 50% FTE (Full time equivalent) for the Comms Pool. Unfortunately, the first months of the pool were hampered by the ill-health, absences, and eventual departure of the post-holder in July 2016. A replacement was appointed and began in August 2016 (still based in London and still at 50% FTE), following hiatus and interim solution undertaken by a Career Manager (CM) in MSF Italy.

Aware of the innovative aspect, potential and strategic importance of the initiative, it was decided from the start to carry out an evaluation at the end of the pilot period, in order to capitalize on lessons learned and decide on how to move forward. The evaluation is especially interesting and relevant given the intersectional nature of the Comms Pool initiative and the interest it triggers in other smaller pools.

When talking about the Comms Pool, the evaluation found that stakeholders often have in mind different realities, while using the same terminology:

- When Comms stakeholders speak about the Comms Pool, they most often refer to a holding tank of competent people, able to fill available positions in an adequate and timely manner, at any given time. This vision implies actions across the whole HR cycle (including recruitment, training, management, appraisal etc.) and is more the result of this work than the system itself.
- HR stakeholders mostly see the Comms Pool as the system enabling the match of candidates with positions. It is the traditional conception of the PM role in MSF, with actions limited to its prescribed role only (other positions are in charge of recruitment, career management, learning and development etc, with the PM "only" linking with relevant actors).

These different perceptions are linked to a lack of clear frame for the Comms Pool, which themselves impacted the evaluation as they lead to a wide range of perspectives on the same subject. The evaluation focused on the creation of the Pool Manager position, and hence on the "HR definition" of the Comms Pool, as per the second point above. However, it was not always possible to be as clear-cut, given among others the very broad ToR for the Steering Committee and the multiplicity of initiatives linked to some extent to the Comms Pool creation. As developed under the Relevance section, there is a need to clarify the frame of the Comms Pool and its boundaries through a work regarding strategy definition and objective setting.

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<sup>1</sup> By "Communications Department" the evaluator refers to Comms Professionals working in OC and PS. There are of course several communications departments within MSF and they were not all, and even less so not all individuals composing them, involved in the Comms Pool initiative. MSF UK Dircom was at the core of the initiative, and this was felt when the post-holder moved on.

<sup>2</sup> 2012 03 March Field Comms Positions Review, 2012 09 September field\_comms\_review, 2014 02 Feb HR report Field Comms.

<sup>3</sup> We will avoid the term "sectional" as it normally refers to partner sections rather than OC and can be confusing.

<sup>4</sup> Communication Officers Pool Management - proposal to IDHR February (note from the evaluator, document from 2015, exact date not available).

## RELEVANCE

All stakeholders, with no exception, praise the Comms Pool initiative in the sense that it is in line with what MSF should do more of: more collaboration across the movement and less competition on scarce HR. Furthermore, the initiative is deemed especially relevant for Comms positions given their nature: often intersectional, often having to deal with several parties/OCs but representing “one” MSF. The limited number of positions per OC made it relevant to seek an overview instead of working in silos, also in order to reach a critical volume of positions and perhaps economies of scale by pulling positions together. Last but not least, everyone acknowledged there was a need to introduce some structure in the way comms profiles were managed, reactively and ad-hoc, with an overall lack of coherence and transparency in recruitment and allocation of positions.

The evaluation focused on the objectives mentioned in the ToR for the Steering Committee for the Comms Pool, and in the ToR for the evaluation i.e.: improve staffing (timeliness, fitness for position, transparency, fairness and quality of HR processes) of Comms positions; have a better career and talent management; be able to fill gaps in competencies through adequate recruitment; have an increased focus on diversity among the Field Comms staff, in order to boost MSF communication capacity towards various audiences; have a positive impact on retention.

The overall positive feeling that the Comms Pool “makes perfect sense” must be taken with caution, as it does not necessarily mean that MSF is hereby coping better with its needs or that the stakeholders have the vision of what the objectives are and to what extent they are relevant. The Comms Pool is the result of the Comms department’s needs, and is expected to achieve much more than good and timely matchings. Today, the *raison d’être* and the reality of what the Comms Pool is are understood differently from one department to another and one person to another, while it would be crucial to have a clear common vision. As expectations towards the Comms Pool vary from one actor to another, there is a lack of focus (too many priorities) and difficulties assessing whether or not the initiative is delivering (See Effectiveness and Impact).

Recommendation 1: Work on a clear strategy for the Comms Pool, with a few SMART objectives.

The needs must be reassessed from Comms and HR perspectives, based on the current situation while staying agile enough to be able to adapt to needed evolutions. The strategy must be translated into a few SMART objectives, which will form the framework of a concrete implementation plan including activities, roles and responsibilities and timeline.

## APPROPRIATENESS

The design of the Comms Pool and the way to launch it is suggested by a consultant in 2014, in the report “Field Comms Positions, HR Process Analysis”. Following this report, decision was taken by DirCom 5 and IDRH to create the Pool. A Steering Committee was established to lead the work towards it. Efforts have been made to engage with relevant HR stakeholders but desk review and interviews highlight the fact that the design of the Comms Pool is the result of a process, which in the end was not participatory and inclusive enough. This is to some extent not only linked to the Comms Pool specifically: given MSF structure, cascading the information is always a challenge and it should not be assumed that informed top/middle management will automatically engage adequately with their teams.

The approach based on a Steering Committee was aiming for adequate representation and participation from different platforms and entities but this system did not alone manage to ensure adequate involvement of relevant stakeholders at the adequate level. While the Comms ownership eventually worked, HR actors did not catch the opportunity to engage enough: in terms of representation in the SC, only the Pool Manager and the newly-appointed International HR coordinator were representing HR. The Pool Management platform was mobilized but several reasons (new post-holders, turnover etc) made the follow-up inadequate in practice. Also, it must be said that the HR perspective of the PS was not represented in the SC.

Consequently, and given its unclear and broad Terms of Reference, the Steering Committee took more space than it should have done. This is something the SC is aware of and wants to address, and while it can be perceived by some interviewees as a willingness to control and decide, it seems to be more of a compensation mechanism.

All stakeholders mention a confusing start. “Frustrating” and “chaotic” are words almost systematically mentioned when discussing the transition to the Comms Pool. The HR process was only introduced formally in March 2017; this

delay explains the lack of clarity felt by all stakeholders for quite some time. Many interviewees do appreciate the structure and increased alignment the HR process has brought but the need for “maintenance” is recognised, along with the fact that the process is a living document meant to evolve and be improved, as it is being tested. Among others, the question of career management must be further looked at as Career Managers and OC focal points encounter difficulties implementing the model, no matter how clear it is in terms of who should be doing what. It should be highlighted that this difficulty goes beyond the Comms Pool: challenges linked to roles and responsibilities in terms of career management and adequate roll out of induction/briefings/debriefings are an-ongoing discussion in all OCs/PS and for all pools.

Recommendation 2: review the HR process, clarify and empower it

Now that the pilot is over, clarification and empowerment of the HR process and Pool Manager role, as well as adjustments to the model will be needed. Even with a process in place, communication is the key aspect in the role of the Pool Manager, who needs to link up adequately with all relevant stakeholders.

## EFFECTIVENESS & IMPACT

The effectiveness of the Comms Pool is difficult to assess as indicators are missing, volume is limited and timeframe is narrow. However, the evaluation looked at available data (cf full version of the evaluation) to the extent it was possible. While it is also too early to assess impact as such, some concrete changes can be noted already, such as the existence of an HR process, harmonization of recruitment procedures and an increased intersectional overview and collaboration. Adequate objectives, indicators and baselines and monitoring over a representative timeframe are crucial to be able to measure effectiveness and impact.

By providing regular follow-up on a set of clear indicators and data, the Comms Pool will improve the way it communicates around objectives and results. It must also streamline the way it does it. Until now, there has not been one single communication channel, via the Pool Manager, but a multiplicity of “senders” (depending on the subject and timing, either the SC as a collective or members of the SC or the PM) and “receivers” (due to no stakeholder mapping and communication plan towards them). The main challenge of any pool is to achieve a good balance between offer and demand and to be able to answer future needs by “building up” the pool (number of people, experience, competencies, profiles etc). This requires clear and adequate communication especially given MSF HR model and intersectional collaboration mechanisms.

Recommendation 3: List key indicators in line with the objectives, establish targets and a simple dashboard and use them for communication towards stakeholders

## EFFICIENCY

The Comms Pool was identified early on as a challenging and innovative initiative, but the resources allocated were not sufficient or adequate. The initiative was expected to perform with 50% FTE of an *existing* resource, based on a calculation from the 2014 HR report. This workload analysis focused solely on the volume of positions and people to be managed, while the pre-launch and launch phase of the Comms Pool would have required a full-time resource, such as a project manager, in order to ensure all necessary steps in the change process (stakeholders’ mapping and engagement, strategy and implementation plan, internal communication, development of processes etc.), especially considering the intersectional nature of the initiative, adding to the complexity.

It is doubtful that the Steering Committee model is the most adapted to the task. Having a SC is not a normal governance mechanism for a pool. Besides, members of the SC are all very busy in their normal responsibilities, causing drop-off rate in meeting attendance and/or limited capacity to follow up on action points to the extent that would be needed, including further adequate mobilization of other actors horizontally and vertically. Challenges encountered by the SC to be efficient are largely due to the lack of leadership and ownership at other levels, unclear or too broad objectives, leading to a multiplicity of “priorities” instead of focusing on the steering role. The latter is important to enable decision-making and to provide some arbitration capacity: this can perhaps be solved via a rotational single focal point rather than a Committee; in any case with the adequate delegated responsibility to decide on behalf of the Comms and HR

departments across the movement, and enough availability to act in a timely manner. The HR and Comms Directors of the hosting partner section should also have an adequate level of engagement, with good leverage capacity and the ability to advocate or liaise according to needs, without interfering with the responsibilities of the Comms Pool Manager/Project manager.

The role and work of the Pool Manager have until now not been articulated around a clear job profile with a set of objectives, which would help steer the efforts, assess performance and provide adequate support. The Comms Pool Manager was *identified* rather than recruited, as the Comms Pool initiative was asked to find HR solutions within existing resources. This explains to some extent the fact that the important step of (re)defining the role and reporting lines was shortcut.

The space created on Sharepoint, where files are uploaded and can be consulted, is not used to the extent it was intended to be, although the list of positions and of candidates are available on this platform. There are also some discrepancies in how Partner Sections, OCs and Pool Manager see their respective “pool”. It is in some cases not either in line with what international staff think.

#### Recommendation 4: Review current governance model and allocate adequate resources over time

Invest in resources, and ensure adequate roles and responsibilities, clear objectives, communication, and monitoring. The SC should be phased out, as planned, now that the pilot phase is over, but after having worked on redefining the strategy and boundaries of the Comms Pool (Recommendation #1) while the role of the PM must be empowered. An SC is not a normal governance model for a pool to function, even if some arbitration capacity must be preserved via a legitimate focal point (rotational). To implement recommendations and fine-tune the system, either a 100% project manager or a 100% PM with project management skills is needed at least for some months.

## CONNECTEDNESS AND CONTINUITY

The Comms Pool has created some structure “out of chaos”, among others when it comes to recruitment. But the criteria according to which people belong or not to the Comms Pool must be clarified in order for the Comms Pool model to be better understood and implemented. Current listings contain some mistakes and approximations, and some staff might even be “missing”.

Fine-tuning should also aim for a more sustainable model and governance system, based among others on findings from this evaluation. To be sustainable, the SC must, before it is phased out, clarify, together with relevant actors, what the expectations on the Pool Manager are: the traditional conception of the role or an exploration of new boundaries? And as a consequence, how it is embedded and interacting with existing systems and positions. The Comms Pool is interconnected with, impacted by and impacting other stakeholders and processes, and therefore its final design must be the result of truly intersectional work at the adequate levels, including implementers and not forgetting the partner sections. Adequate leadership around the initiative has been missing and the issue must be tackled. While Dircom 5 and IDRH decided upon the creation of the Comms Pool, the topic was then left in the hands of the SC, which needed support and arbitration to develop the model and gain legitimacy.

Despite the existence of the HR process and the PM position, matching of Comms positions is still based to quite some extent on relationships and informality. While this is quite representative of MSF ways of working and culture, the shift in culture must happen now: all stakeholders must play the game, try to stick to the system, and provide feedback on it in a constructive manner, so that the Comms Pool model can be fully tested and adjusted, and capitalize on the structure it was meant to build and has started to put in place.

#### Recommendation # 5: To be sustainable and successful, the Comms Pool must gain in clarity and legitimacy.

Improve adequate internal communication towards all relevant stakeholders, Comms, HR and members of the pool. While processes are being clarified and implemented, it should not be forgotten that despite the existence of a system, Pool Management is all about people and adequate and timely communication.

Adequate management and support towards the post-holder, as well as clear accountability on results is crucial to ensure success and must guide the decision to choose a host section for the Comms Pool. As the system is gaining in structure, it should also remain flexible and not person-dependent, so that it can work anytime, anywhere and adapt to changing needs, turnover, and evolutive set-ups.

# LESSONS LEARNED

The Comms Pool initiative encountered some challenges. Main learning points are listed below, to help avoid the same shortcomings in the future, for the Comms Pool as well as for other similar projects.

1. Apply project and change management theory and steps; this is a needed investment which will pay off. Avoid the temptation of seeking immediate wins and economies (e.g. composing with existing resources when it is not sure it is adequate). Important work must be done pre-launch (analysis and design) and during implementation phase (communication, support, etc.), requiring a specific set of skills.
2. Conduct thorough needs analysis and set SMART objectives; this is crucial in any project. Do not let any sense of urgency rush through those stages; without a clear picture and understanding of the vision, the risk of getting lost along the way and/or failing is very high. Make sure the objectives relate clearly to the identified needs so that an evaluation can measure to what extent they have been met.
3. When a complex intersectional process has to be developed or reviewed, once the middle and top management is informed and on-board, the same must happen at the level of the implementers, and they are the ones who should compose the working group(s) to design the system. A good mapping of roles, responsibilities and existing processes (stakeholder mapping and RACI analysis) is an important first step before any design, to ensure it is in line with needs and realities. A top-down approach should be avoided.
4. Adequate objectives, indicators and baselines are crucial in order to be able to measure achievements.
5. There is no such thing as collective responsibility, but there can and should be shared responsibilities, especially in the case of transversal / cross departmental projects. Delegation of decision making is crucial to avoid bottlenecks.
6. Adopt a systemic approach and perform sufficient analysis before implementing any change, making sure side effects are anticipated and mitigated.
7. Internal communication and large buy-in among *all* relevant stakeholders are keys to ensure success and sustainability of a system.

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