



MSF-OCBA

EMERGENCY RESPONSE CAPACITY REVIEW

2014-2016

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SHORT VERSION

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on the analysis of a widening gap between humanitarian needs and the aid sector's response in complex emergencies, MSF-OCBA has placed its operational focus on interventions in armed conflict and emergencies. A comprehensive advocacy initiative – The Emergency Gap Project – has accompanied and supported the operational effort.

Having met its operational Strategic Plan ambitions, OCBA commissioned a review of its emergency response and support capacity with the aim to identify the enabling and disabling factors. The findings are intended to inform internal debates about future strategic choices, as well as to support OCBA's dialogue with external actors on the topic of emergency response.

The review provides a macro perspective of OCBA's major emergency interventions between 2014 and 2016, as well as the Mission Emergency Response Units. It also examined the organizational support to emergency response, and identified areas that OCBA may consider as strategic priorities to further improve its emergency response capacity. The scope of the review – numerous complex emergency interventions and organizational support over a period of three years – did not allow for in-depth research. Findings and conclusions are based on interviews with staff from relevant departments and levels of the organization, supported by the analysis of available operational data.

Between 2014 and 2016, OCBA's interventions in armed conflict and emergencies have grown proportionally (compared to interventions in other context), as well as in absolute terms, as the operational portfolio saw significantly growth overall. OCBA's presence - with considerable scale - in most of the major humanitarian emergencies is a remarkable achievement.

Several factors were identified as enabling the organization to implement its ambition. Key among them was strong and cohesive leadership in articulating and promoting the vision, institutional willingness to accept security and operational risk, and decisiveness in implementation of the vision. In addition, a culture of trust and delegated responsibility, especially towards and within the Emergency Unit, has helped to enable staff to take initiative and risk. OCBA should ensure that this value, and that of an emergency mind-set, is cultivated within the organization.

On operational level, the establishment of emergency team units in missions in volatile and emergency-prone contexts has enabled the Emergency Unit to concentrate its efforts on the major complex emergency contexts. In assertive states, they also function as access-enablers.

Organizational support capacity has been stretched by the overall operational growth, combined with the changing support requirements generated by the operational choices. Adaptations to meet these support demands have largely been made, and have led to improvements of the support provided by the Service Departments to emergency interventions. A wide range of technical and operational aspects in need of improvement have been identified, both concerning implementation and as well as support. Joint prioritization and better inter-departmental coordination is necessary to optimize tackling these challenges.

The most pressing and biggest challenge to OCBA's emergency response capacity is the shortage of experienced emergency coordinators. The HR department and the Emergency Unit have launched various initiatives to mitigate the supply gap. To effectively address this challenge, it should become a strategic organizational priority. Joint responsibility and coordination, in particular between the HR Department and Operations, is of critical importance to identify, develop, and retain staff capable of managing emergency interventions in complex contexts.

Other topics that warrant consideration as strategic priorities include structural and process issues. The structural topic relates mainly to the question whether the EU (Emergency Unit) requires different capacities, authority, and responsibilities to most effectively improve organizational emergency response and support capacity. In addition, a review the effectiveness of the OCT (Operations Core Team) and Core MT (Management Team) may provide opportunities to enhance strategic steering.

With regard to processes, OCBA has invested in the development of organizational emergency processes to enable timely and effective emergency response, in particular in Operations, HR, Finance, and Supply. As result of the operational policy and increasing bureaucratic hurdles in many countries of operations, a growing proportion of interventions face short planning horizons, and require tailor-made support and solutions. The implications of these developments warrant further analysis: not only of whether the 'regular' process should remain the default modus operandi, but also how to balance the drive for standardization with the need for tailor-made support needs and solutions.

OCBA has made great strides in the implementation of its vision to assist those at the heart of armed conflict and humanitarian emergencies. The choice to continue to focus on conflict and emergencies, and improve the relevance of its assistance, will necessitate setting, and steering on, clear strategic priorities that aim to enhance the organization's emergency response capacity.

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