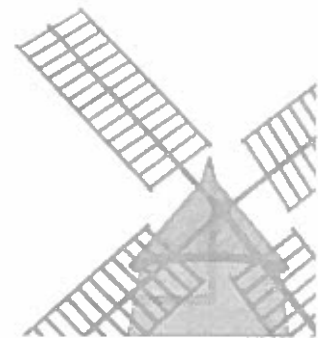


# **My Sweet La Mancha<sup>1</sup>**

**Invited and voluntary contributions  
July-October 2005**

<sup>1</sup> See Ritsuro Usul's contribution



Good Humanitarian Donorship; the UN Reform Process are underpinned by similar principles. The shape of the international aid architecture is changing. It is becoming more 'joined up'. There is an emphasis on collective learning, on stronger co-ordination, more centralised control – for standardisation and rationalising the system. And for weeding out those agencies which do not comply. These forces are very strong. For better or worse they reflect the characteristics of an increasingly globalised and inter-connected world.

So, where does the outsider fit in with this? Is there any genuine space left for 'independence'? What is the best approach to enhance solidarity with the oppressed?

And what are the consequences if the outsider position is maintained – for example what will be the result of not adopting the *People in Aid Code of Best Practice*? Is it fair on MSF personnel? Will it affect recruitment in 5 years? There are many similar questions.

On the one hand, MSF may have to realign their understanding of what it means to be 'independent.' There may be a danger that not 'joining up' is not fair on MSF staff and that it will lead to increasing marginalisation in an increasingly interconnected humanitarian system. This would be a bad thing for all of us as, at the end of the day, a marginalised MSF mean less voice for the poorest on the International stage.

On the other hand, it may be that MSF are, unlike some smaller agencies, strong enough to survive on the outside. Indeed, an outsider's perspective may be even more important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where humanitarian agencies are more compelled to adopt a more 'systemic' and standardised approach. A clear voice from outside of the system may be even more important now than it was in the past.

## Biting the Hand That Feeds You

By Peter Redfield, Associate Professor, Dept of Anthropology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, redfield@unc.edu, September 2005.

### 1. Disclosure

I write about MSF as an unusually interested outsider. In professional terms I'm an academic, trained in anthropology and employed as a professor in an American university. For the last five years I've been slowly following strands of MSF with the objective of writing a book about it, along with the shifting techniques and ethics of humanitarianism. My position has advantages and disadvantages for pursuing such a project. Most crucially, perhaps, it puts me on a regular, if intermittent timetable, one quite unlike the frantic and ever shifting agenda of MSF. I'm rarely near any frontline and usually several crises behind. On the other hand, I also have more time to read through old newsletters, talk to people in a variety of contexts and pursue issues beyond the needs of the present or, for that matter, the demands of news markets that a journalist might face. For academics the space of reflection here called *La Mancha* is familiar ground, crowded with generations of windmills. Standing among them I offer a few general observations, and hope that some prove appropriately provocative. To make it a little easier to skim, I've grouped the text into shorter blocks under subheadings.

### 2. Principles

Before responding to this invitation to reflect on MSF I dutifully reviewed the ten commandments of Chantilly. What strikes me most about this assembled doctrine is how it incorporates all manner of potential tensions and the seeds of continuing arguments. Independence, yes, but also transparency and accountability, defense of human rights, yes, but also a spirit of neutrality, an association of volunteers, yes, but in an organization large and structured enough to write down "practical rules for operating." Each principle may appear perfectly sensible on its own terms, and yet it is not difficult to imagine situations that would call for exceptions, or at the very least flexible interpretation on the ground. Several exceptions are obvious enough to appear in the text itself. For example "medical action first" allows for the provision of basic survival needs like clean water, and "témoignage" accepts the possibility of either silence or suspending assistance when in the best interests of victims. More generally, recognition of real world variation haunts the document: not every "precarious situation" may be identical, and the gap between providing some sort of minimal care in the immediate present and assisting people to regain control over their future can be great. By Chantilly, MSF was no longer a young or naive endeavor, and the delegates clearly understood that their principles of reference would require considerable interpretation in practice. Given their organization's argumentative heritage and expansive moral ambition, this is no surprise.

Beneath the Chantilly principles lies the dual desire that largely birthed MSF – at least the mythic MSF – in the first place: to respond to human suffering with technically competent action *and* appropriate moral outrage. The movement's rapid growth over the last three decades suggests that this

combination has proved seductive to assorted members of the public in Europe and beyond. MSF's conflicted history also cautions that actual implementation of such a project is endlessly complicated, and not infrequently compromised. While a sharply coherent response to the bad conscience of the Red Cross and the advent of more global media, this dual desire carries with it its own potential contradiction. The more effective MSF tries to be in its own immediate operations, the more it must provide the very services it feels others should be providing outside of limited "crisis periods." Such actions can only occur under protest, and be thought of as short-term, exceptional gestures. Even longer-term projects focused on particular diseases retain the rhetoric of emergency substitution for what is really the responsibility of others. In this sense MSF is always objecting to the very necessity of its efforts, and always preparing to leave even as it arrives. At the same time, however, the history of its missions and initiatives reveals a disheartening degree of repetition in the list of crisis areas from year to year, as well as a de facto long-term presence in certain countries, shifting cyclically across topics and sites. MSF, then, is caught within a deeper dilemma than could be solved by any new tablets or training manuals. To quote the Nobel Lecture: "ours is not a contented action."

I do not mean to suggest that efforts to establish doctrine such as that undertaken at Chantilly are irrelevant for MSF's international organization, anymore than the long shelf of guidebooks and training manuals found at every document center. Writing is clearly essential to everyday operations now, however much MSF may be thought an oral culture. My point is simply that at a conceptual level MSF is less a movement built around principles than around attitude, along with a continued sense of its own authenticity.

### 3. Attitude

To describe MSF's general attitude I'll refer to the English idiom that cautions against "biting the hand that feeds you." In most cases this phrase urges restraint in the name of self-interest, a form of obedience familiar to any domesticated animal. Here I'll use this barnyard metaphor as a way of trying to think about MSF and the state of its union in 2005. For it seems to me that MSF's most fundamental ambition is to always maintain the possibility of disobedience, even to the extent of violating self-interest. At least in its mythic self-conception, MSF stands apart from more docile forms of humanitarianism in its willingness to bite. While other groups might match it in technical ability, or surpass it in organizational order, MSF claims an edge of wildness and unpredictability. And although it may have grown from a shoestring operation to a major nonprofit enterprise, MSF strives to refuse its own institutionalization and reveal a rebellious core. This may be particularly true of the French Jacobins, but they certainly have no monopoly on the overall rhetoric.

As much as MSF has a collective dream of salvation beyond saving particular lives, I believe it involves the group's potential ability to forsake its own interests if necessary in the effort to assist endangered populations. In every section and mission I've visited, individuals suggested in one fashion or another that the whole operation should disband before becoming complacent, or simply another cog in the greater humanitarian machinery. This claimed potential for renunciation serves to distinguish MSF from both bureaucratic agencies and profit oriented corporations. In daily practice it would be easy to find examples where one or more sections have not lived up to this self-conception, and to castigate the group for not doing more to achieve it. Certainly the last decade has brought new layers to the organizational charts, more fundraising and publicity and thereby added to the overall aura of an established enterprise. But more interestingly to me, MSF has also remained just enough unhappy with itself to continue questioning its own limits. The last decade has also seen a whole range of new projects addressing expanded areas of concern such as HIV/AIDS, neglected diseases and sexual

violence. Whatever else these different ventures may produce, they have forced MSF to re-examine not only its definitions of crisis, but also its modes of operating and its sense of collective identity. Whether this current period of questioning leads to further departures or to a reaffirmation of more classic priorities, MSF will have kept the terrifying prospect of complacency at bay a little bit longer. In the process perhaps it will confront the uncomfortable fact that it never operates in a vacuum.

### 4. Context

"If once they are habituated to it, though but for one half-year, they will never be satisfied to have it otherwise. And, having looked to Government for bread, on the very first scarcity they will turn and bite the hand that fed them." Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (vol. V, p. 156), 1795.

Here I will switch from internal factors to external ones, what anthropologists think of as "context" and often spend considerable time investigating. Over the last decade, MSF has struggled to keep up with changing conditions and the significance of local and international history to the operation of its missions. The movement also carries the burden of its own past actions, and the expectations they may have generated for all involved. As it turns out, the phrase I have chosen for this exercise contains features in the political history of assistance. The caution about bitten hands entered the historical record two centuries ago with Edmund Burke's treatise *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. There Burke – a prominent early conservative, and famous opponent of the French Revolution – considers the question of self-interest from the other end, that of the feeder rather than the fed. He warns governments against the folly of regulating grain and directly feeding the masses, a practice that will make expectations of governance grow and distort the natural order of markets. However much one might doubt Burke's political conclusions about market regulation, his comments on Roman grain distribution sound two general notes of warning for all would be meddlers into anything: 1) that conditions change when you intervene, and 2) that once you start handing things out there's no guarantee against being bitten yourself.

Some problems of the humanitarian present may not be as new as we who live now might think: MSF's own chronicles tell of instances of manipulation, abduction and death in decades past, and the Red Cross struggled from the outset to establish its distinctiveness relative to military health services, even at the level of access to official armbands. But certain norms do appear to have shifted, affecting the relative degree of surprise or expectation that greets any particular action. Most significantly, humanitarian gestures have become a staple of public rhetoric at a deeper level than ever before, deployed across the political spectrum. This makes it all the more difficult for MSF to define its particular terms of engagement, or explain with sufficient nuance why it might be for and against different versions of "humanitarian" action in the same place.

### 5. Great Expectations

When discussing MSF with academic audiences familiar with what once was called the Third World, I've often heard comments to the effect that populations receiving aid care less about who delivers it or why than the simple fact that it is there. Certainly it's my experience that beneficiaries (as well as donors and potential recruits) make far fewer distinctions between humanitarianism and development, or even human rights, than do NGO natives. They are also less likely to distinguish between emergency and post-emergency "phases" or see the need for an organization to depart before its welcome has expired. Humanitarian work may indeed represent a limited end in itself, the "bed for the night" that David Rieff suggests with Bertolt Brecht's haunting line. Recently several prominent figures in MSF have cautioned as much in their different ways. But the field of expectations within which humanitarianism

operates has, if anything, only grown over the last decade. When MSF starts providing services it opens itself to those expectations, alongside whatever attachments its teams form in the field. If it wishes its distinctiveness to be more apparent on the ground (and not only its internal discussions), MSF could better address in local settings why it leaves the future to others, and whose responsibility that might be. It also might consider where, precisely, and to whom its *témoignage* is directed. Terms like “political authority” and “civil society” can quickly become comfortable platitudes. MSF has the advantage of dealing with tangible moral goods such as medicine and clean water, that are – at least in emergency settings – relatively easy to translate. But its pattern of comings and goings is much harder to decipher for those who don’t so easily travel the world.

Maps of mission sites and budget allocations present and past suggest that MSF has a natural habitat of sorts: the crisis zones of poor countries, particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. This point is obvious, but nonetheless significant when thinking about MSF’s own expectations. Missions elsewhere remain smaller and often veer in different directions, confronting social issues or political barriers. Much of the apparatus MSF painstakingly assembled over its first decades of existence fits emergencies that unfold in a relative power vacuum. Settings with tighter political control, particularly a more coherent tradition of public health and greater bureaucratic presence, require adjustments to the operational equipment. As with the policy work of the Access Campaign, advocacy in stronger states and busier media markets may require different forms of negotiation and strategies of dissemination.

#### 6. Family Feuds

When I read accounts of intersectional relations, I’m sometimes struck how the protagonists often overlook – or strategically ignore – the simple fact that most of the world is blissfully unaware that MSF even *has* sections. Outside the professional aid community, few people fully understand the distinctions between one organization and another, let alone the different national sections of MSF. In rhetorical terms, MSF is always singular. This is especially true when it comes to advocacy; few outside the organization could make fine distinctions the precise source of a statement or brochure. Even quite a few within the organization are rather fuzzy about the differences, and a number of people have told me how surprised they were on their first mission to find out that they had joined a specific clan in a sometimes warring tribe.

Some sectional differences may partly relate to national differences, at least in the contextual sense of reflecting different moments of origin and historical connection. But for the present, at least, I speculate that a mafia metaphor might be more apt: separate factlons sharing a common racket, and quarrelling even as they cooperate. As an anthropologist I’ve been struck by the way some people’s career paths through MSF cross sectional boundaries and others don’t. Since I’m following other interests I haven’t tried to formally analyze these patterns, but suspect they might reveal something about the dynamics at work in moments of conflict alongside ideology and history. None of this is to suggest that the more bitter quarrels lack substance. The moments of tension around decisions to speak out have certainly marked real disagreements over difficult issues. But the structural dynamics and mythic legacy of MSF favor dramatic gestures, and at key moments the behavior of one section can effectively alter the equation for all. Given that speaking out is more likely to alter the public equation of expectation, a decision to speak out and a decision to work silently are not equal actions. It is also much easier to bite hard when farther removed from the consequences.

#### 7. La Mancha

Someone once noted to me that MSF’s constant self-questioning might have the side effect of inoculating it against external criticism. Certainly there is a risk of learning only partial lessons from familiar sources. Even worse, the movement might succumb to a common academic disease, assuming that because an issue has been discussed it is therefore solved. The central problems MSF tries to confront are open-ended, and extend far beyond the limited moments of its engagement with them. For all the fancier production quality and expanded topical concerns, the reports of the past and the present feature common themes about the importance of life and dignity. The regular stream of charitable fundraising materials arriving at my door often echo each other, including similar phrases and photos. Some are more convincing than others, to be sure, especially when read carefully, or with some knowledge of history. But the overall pattern is a blur, and blends into the great wash of commercial advertising that we (the we who receive such things, at least) all experience.

Given that its strategy for independence depends on private fundraising, MSF’s decision to cease accepting donations for the South Asia tsunami last January was particularly interesting. Although it ultimately may not have suffered financially (and indeed garnered a fresh layer of notoriety to reinvigorate its authenticity), the decision involved risk, and in this case of biting a directly feeding hand. In MSF’s current moment of reflection I wonder whether or not this is a sign of things to come. As I write this little essay, private fundraising for those displaced in the United States by Hurricane Katrina has topped \$1 billion and may be on track to outpace the records of September 11th. Opportunities to contribute are certainly ubiquitous. At the same time the U.S. federal government is calculating expenditures of perhaps \$200 billion. Such quantitative contrasts remind us that MSF works across radically different scales, speaking about great (but abstract) things with a relatively small (but tangible) footprint. How far would MSF really be willing to go against its own interests in the name of a higher value? Would it disband, or reorient itself before it grew too comfortable with the task of alleviating suffering? By now it not only has larger interests than ever before, but also larger responsibilities and obligations.

Here I can only return you to Cervantes’ La Mancha, with its makeshift knight, squire and warhorse. The author of *Don Quixote* was many other things in his long life, including a soldier and a slave. By the time he found fame as a writer, he well knew both the beauty of noble dreams and the dangers of too much reading.