BRIDGING THE EMERGENCY GAP

The humanitarian sector is failing to mount timely and adequate responses during the acute phase of conflict-related emergencies, where increasing professionalisation across the sector has not been matched by its performance on the ground.
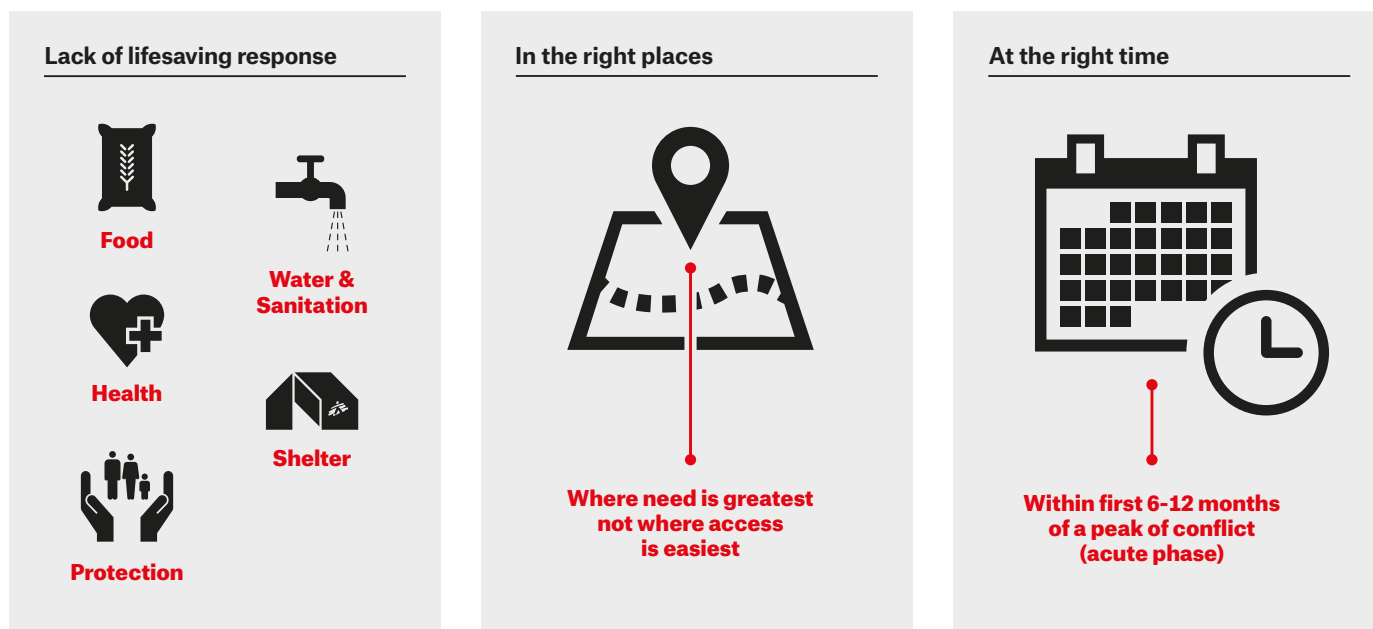
This is a short version of the *Bridging the emergency gap* report, which sets out the key findings of the two-year Emergency Gap Project[1] and reinforces calls by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) for a renewed humanitarian commitment to remain on the ground and address critical needs in acute conflicts.

Consultations with senior staff across the humanitarian sector have revealed a consensus that the humanitarian system is struggling to deliver lifesaving assistance to those in need. Driven by evidence of persistent challenges to effective response in acute conflicts for all actors, including MSF, the Project has unpacked the factors that shape the humanitarian sector's emergency response.

The Project has defined the emergency gap as the failure to ensure lifesaving services in the right places at the right time, particularly in the first year of an acute crisis. The gap is a shared concern across humanitarian organisations, a tangible humanitarian challenge and a key obstacle to the prevention of avoidable loss of life and suffering in conflicts worldwide.

FIGURE 1. What is the emergency gap?

Lack of lifesaving response

Food

Water & Sanitation

Health

Shelter

Protection

In the right places

Where need is greatest not where access is easiest

At the right time

Within first 6-12 months of a peak of conflict (acute phase)

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[1] The conclusions presented in this report are those of the Emergency Gap Project alone and should not be attributed to the wider MSF movement.
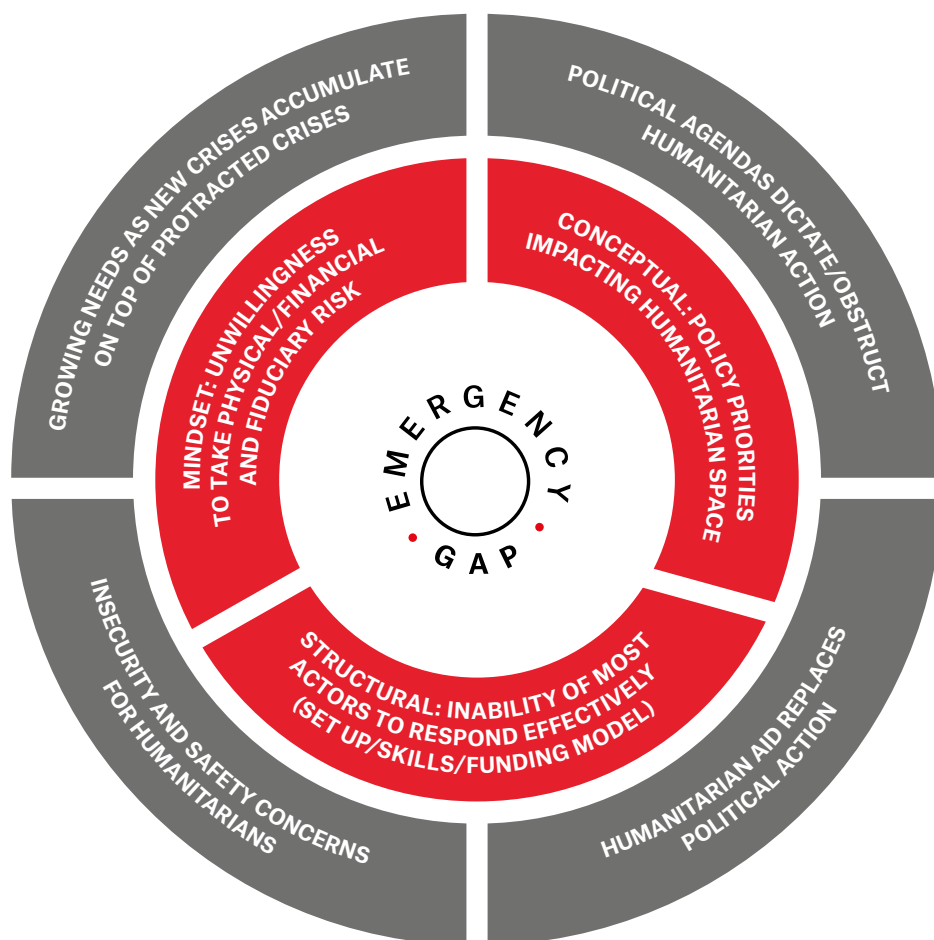
KEY REFLECTIONS

Powerful external forces beyond the control of the humanitarian community have overloaded the humanitarian plate and created an environment unfavourable for humanitarian action, including the politicisation, instrumentalisation and obstruction of aid for political purposes. Humanitarian space is often severely curtailed by the impulse to use it for a different objective (often political or military) or to block and deny it. In contexts of too-high or too-little strategic importance, humanitarian assistance is often used as a substitute for political action. However, the emergency gap is also fuelled by internal factors that are well within the sector's control.

Internally, the sector is overly focused on the 'funding gap' between the resources available and the cost of meeting people's needs. Resources are woefully inadequate, but the funding gap is only one part of the problem. The current debate on improving humanitarian policies and financing overlooks crucial flaws in the conceptual drive of the sector, its structural set up, and the predominant mindset that shapes the sector's response —three internal elements that have been the focus of the Emergency Gap Project and its final report, *Bridging the emergency gap*.

FIGURE 2. What drives the emergency gap?

- ⬤ External drivers
- 🔴 Internal drivers

GROWING NEEDS AS NEW CRISES ACCUMULATE ON TOP OF PROTRACTED CRISES

POLITICAL AGENDAS DICTATE/OBSTRUCT HUMANITARIAN ACTION

INSECURITY AND SAFETY CONCERNS FOR HUMANITARIANS

HUMANITARIAN AID REPLACES POLITICAL ACTION

MINDSET: UNWILLINGNESS TO TAKE PHYSICAL/FINANCIAL AND FIDUCIARY RISK

CONCEPTUAL: POLICY PRIORITIES IMPACTING HUMANITARIAN SPACE

STRUCTURAL: INABILITY OF MOST ACTORS TO RESPOND EFFECTIVELY (SET UP/SKILLS/FUNDING MODEL)

EMERGENCY GAP

THE CONCEPTUAL ELEMENT

Conceptually, the humanitarian imperative —the moral obligation to alleviate suffering— has been integrated into a wider agenda spanning chronic poverty, climate vulnerability, political insecurity and counter-terrorism. As a result, there is growing pressure to align humanitarian action with broader developmental and political goals.

Emergency response is undervalued in a dominant policy discourse focused increasingly on coherence and integration —a discourse that has gained political traction since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 and is reinforced by the New Way of Working (NWOW) that, taken together, aim for more synergies across humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors. The most severe costs of this push are seen when it reinforces the politicisation of aid and its impact on the people who need assistance. The costs include the absence of lifesaving services for those trapped in crises of little geo-political importance, and the denial of lifesaving assistance to those trapped on the 'wrong side' of crises of high geo-political importance.

The report reveals growing concerns that emergency response may be subsumed by today's over-arching pursuit of long-term and transformative ambitions, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as counter-terrorism, state-building and other geo-political agendas. Laudable as these goals are, humanitarian action should not be subordinated to them in the list of global priorities.

The Project has also confirmed that many humanitarian NGOs, donors and UN agencies share MSF's view that the political and structural push for greater coherence of vision, goals and operational models threatens to delegitimise principled humanitarian action and jeopardise the ability to deliver impartial assistance in conflict settings. Current policy thinking also ignores major differences in the types of crises and contexts in which humanitarians must operate, and there is little consideration of the fact that the types of action that must be prioritized in acute crises differ from those in situations that are more stable. In reality, diverse needs require diverse approaches by diverse actors.

THE STRUCTURAL ELEMENT

The humanitarian sector is failing to capitalise upon the diversity of its actors, approaches and operational models. Instead, coordination, planning and funding streams are articulated around UN-led architecture and processes, which often favour coherence of action over agility and timeliness. The mismatch between the core recipients of funding —UN agencies— and frontline deliverers of aid is a major technical challenge for the speedy transfer of financial resources. It is also a fundamental design flaw that hampers support for the investments needed if humanitarian organisations are to stay and deliver in acute crises.

Growing centralisation emerges from a vision of the humanitarian community as a system of tightly fitting elements that all contribute to one purpose, rather than an ecosystem of independent and often diverging missions, goals, ambitions, and operational and organisational models. The result is a single humanitarian set-up with common systems to identify needs, plan the response, mobilise resources, implement projects and deliver aid largely under UN leadership and coordination, a role that is increasingly shared with the government of the country in crisis even in contexts where the government is party to the conflict or a key driver of the crisis. This integration makes humanitarian planning, fundraising and coordination easier and is, therefore, encouraged by government donors, but does little to promote the flexibility, timeliness and ability to act independently that are so vital for principled action in conflict-related and politically contested crises.

Yet experience on the ground tells us that an effective emergency response in conflict relies on the ability to act quickly, negotiate access and deliver effectively. This, in turn, relies on investments in security management, logistics and stand-by technical expertise. In practice, operational independence —the ability to make and execute decisions— needs unearmarked funding that allows flexible programming choices and risk management.

THE MINDSET ELEMENT

The ultimate ethical dilemma facing any humanitarian organisation is to decide how far to go, and at what point the risks become so great that it may be necessary to limit or withhold lifesaving assistance.

Obviously, war zones are dangerous places, and working in any conflict is bound to be risky, messy and costly. Yet today's humanitarian mindset has become conservative, risk-averse and cost-obsessed —the result of structural flaws and a growing aversion not only to security risks, but also financial and reputational ones. This mindset is often driven by donors' stringent monitoring and reporting policies and their reluctance to accept uncertainty or to fund potential failure, as well as by non-governmental organisations trying to balance operational demands, institutional constraints and donor dependency. All stakeholders interviewed for the Emergency Gap Project spoke of unrealistic accountability and compliance norms that restrict their ability to accept risk, whether they were humanitarian organisations under pressure from donors, or donors under pressure from their taxpayers and parliaments.

As a result, organisations go for the 'low-hanging fruit' by responding where needs are evident and access straightforward, rather than risk expansion beyond their areas of regular operations. Instead of risk *management* the sector is increasingly intent on risk *devolution*, with each actor pushing risk as far away as it can. In essence, the risks that are inevitable in highly insecure environments are treated as an unsurmountable obstacle, rather than an operational challenge to be overcome.

CONCLUSIONS

The political environment remains the key factor in the shrinking of the space for humanitarian action. Humanitarian space is compromised by obstruction and constraints that are often fuelled by political objectives. **But even where space is available, there is no guarantee that the humanitarian sector is willing or able to step up and pro**vide assistance to meet critical needs in a conflict.

Tweaking the existing and entrenched system will not generate a better emergency response. However, the UN and donors can create a space where organisations that are willing to take a more active role in the early phases of crises can find pragmatic ways to do so and deliver results.

Conceptually, humanitarian policy is focused on the humanitarian-development nexus, which has expanded to peace and security under the NWOW, with emphasis on common goals, linear progress and strategies to build or reinforce states. This overlooks the relevance of emergency response, the role of independent humanitarian action and the specificities of conflict —particularly in protracted conflicts that see recurrent peaks of acute crisis. There will be humanitarian needs as new crises erupt or more 'stable' crises regress into acute phases for the foreseeable future. Efforts to make the transition from humanitarian to development approaches cannot, therefore, come at the expense of emergency response.

While the humanitarian sector must be able to pursue both long-term and short-term ambitions, tensions between the two are likely to manifest in acute emergencies. When these prove irreconcilable, the sector must retain the ability to guarantee effective and impartial response to critical needs whether or not this aligns with the long-term strategic objectives for the country.
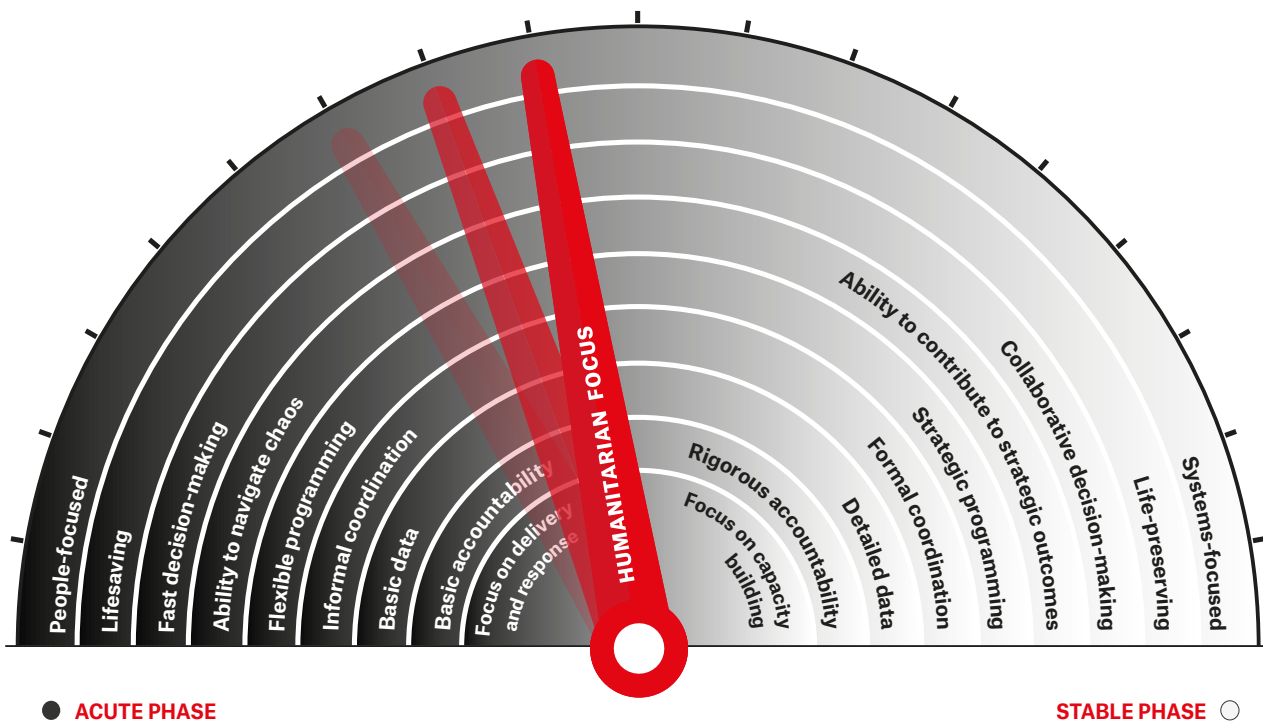
Structurally, the principle of a diverse and complex humanitarian ecosystem should be embraced to allow the creation of reliable surge capacity, driven by an emergency mindset and results oriented action. In an ecosystem, different operational and strategic approaches nurture and support collective outcomes even when they do not collaborate directly with each other.

The right surge capacity is essential. Despite the major access restrictions faced by humanitarian actors, one 'quick fix' would be to ensure a minimum number of competent organisations capable of delivering consistently, in a timely manner, at scale and across all lifesaving sectors in conflict emergencies. This would require emergency-minded organisations and donors to come together to build a reliable and well-prepared international surge capacity that can be rapidly deployed to deliver assistance in the initial phases of a crisis.

Humanitarian organisations need the agility and capacity to work in volatile situations, so it is **crucial to preserve operational independence, free of the bureaucratic burdens that characterise common response plans, competing political agendas and wider ambitions around coherence.** The ability to make and execute operational decisions requires financing to support structural investments and results-oriented performance, strong security management[2] and negotiated access,[3] and the creation of specialised pools of people available for rapid deployment, as well as independent logistics and transport.

Humanitarian organisations must be able to shift their focus as crises evolve. One size does not fit all, and crises do not evolve in a linear manner. Depending on the level of acuteness, the focus of the response will need to adapt and this should inform the priorities. At the most acute end of the crisis spectrum, the focus should be on addressing critical needs as quickly as possible. At the other end, the response can be more sophisticated, complex and formalised.

FIGURE 4. Adaptive focus

ACUTE PHASE

People-focused · Lifesaving · Fast decision-making · Ability to navigate chaos · Flexible programming · Informal coordination · Basic data · Basic accountability · Focus on delivery and response

HUMANITARIAN FOCUS

Focus on capacity building · Rigorous accountability · Detailed data · Formal coordination · Strategic programming · Ability to contribute to strategic outcomes · Collaborative decision-making · Life-preserving · Systems-focused

STABLE PHASE

[1] Linked to programme management.
[2] Which is, in turn, aided by "walking the talk" (in terms of principles) and "delivering" (these two elements retro-feed and, therefore, allow the maintenance of access and the possibility of gaining further access).

RECOMMENDATIONS

If the humanitarian sector is to bridge —or at least reduce— the emergency gap, it must acknowledge the need to pursue short and long-term aid objectives simultaneously. This means reinstating emergency response as a key area of intervention by cultivating the humanitarian mindset of emergency-focused organisations that can operate in conflict settings, and backing their operations with the necessary structural investments.

In the face of glaring disregard for international legal frameworks, politicisation of aid, and mounting human suffering around the world, the need for an effective and principled humanitarian response capacity in emergencies is more pressing than ever. To be effective, and to be humanitarian, the sector must maintain enough independence to deliver aid according to the needs of people, rather than institutional donor priorities, national strategic objectives, international agendas, or even the lofty goals of the SDGs.

The emergency gap will only grow bigger if the different parts of the humanitarian community continue to blame each other for their risk-aversion and fail to recognise the need to strengthen their focus, investments and capacity to deliver. Some organisations are willing to step up and enhance emergency response capacity to bridge the emergency gap. However, some have the might but not yet the mindset, and those that have the mindset do not always have the necessary resources.

The following recommendations are directed to key actors that have responsibilities and roles in improving emergency responses in acute conflicts. They are not the only solutions to the challenges outlined in *Bridging the emergency gap*, but they are based on lessons from MSF operations and the Emergency Gap Project's reflections on the state of emergency response. Other organisations with different operational filters may propose different and better solutions based on their own policies and practice. In that sense, these recommendations are contributions to spur a more strategic debate on how to build a humanitarian sector that deploys on time, stays on the ground and delivers better in conflict.

Recommendations for donors

Recommendations for donor aid agencies are divided into two key 'strands': *policy*, and *financing* and *capacity*.

On *policy,* donors are urged to **reassert the importance of policies that enable effective humanitarian action and support the operational independence and negotiation capacity of implementing humanitarian organisations on the ground.** They should **reassert the primacy of the core principles of humanitarian action wherever it is undertaken**, particularly in contexts of armed conflict, political violence, counter-terrorism, security and military operations.

While humanitarian action can contribute to the achievement of long-term ambitions such as the SDGs, its scope, priorities and timeframe remain fundamentally different. Donors should **reinstate two crucial elements of policy —timeliness and meeting critical needs—** that should never be sacrificed for other strategic goals.

On *financing* and *capacity*, donors should **meet their commitments to provide adequate support** to frontline organisations, including the core funding that provides the necessary flexibility and predictability to support the necessary operational structures upon which effective access and delivery depend. Donors may have to loosen tight reins of accountability that stop organisations taking the necessary risks, and accept the likelihood of some financial losses and deviation of resources in the quest to deliver humanitarian aid. At the same time, **donors should ensure that their implementing partners provide a true picture** of their presence, their response, and their ability to meet people's critical needs.

Recommendations for the United Nations

The UN should lead a process to relegitimise humanitarian action and its core function of emergency response. At country level, this should translate into administrative and legal frameworks that enable a truly independent humanitarian emergency response for all actors on the ground, even for those international organisations that do not participate in the Humanitarian Response Plan. These frameworks should have both a political dimension, relating to acceptance and recognition of the value of humanitarian action including its short-term ambitions to save lives and alleviate suffering in real time, impartially and independently, firewalled from political agendas or considerations; and a more practical focus on fast-tracking key administrative procedures for emergency response.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) should **systematically assess and map the risks that emerging global policies, such as the NWOW, pose for principled humanitarian action.** The UN can also champion and put into practice its own 'stay and deliver' principle with the same determination as the protection of staff and assets, and ensure a clear distinction between UN humanitarian agencies and the more political and military UN bodies.

Recommendations for international non-governmental organisations

Emergency minded INGOs should actively pursue and champion a humanitarian environment that is conceptually and operationally conducive to emergency response. While operational delivery is the key arena for upholding emergency response and protecting the humanitarian space, it should also be championed at coordination and planning levels in the field, and through policy involvement at the global level.

They should reach out proactively to donors, challenging the sector's project-focused business model to seek the quality funding and the right partnership conditions for an effective emergency response to critical needs. Equally, they should accurately represent their capacity, presence and coverage in humanitarian emergencies, and match their emergency operations with the necessary structural investments. The overstating of presence or impact to secure funding should not be tolerated by any part of the humanitarian sector.

Recommendations for MSF

MSF should explore ways to ensure the necessary investments for a stronger presence and more effective delivery in acute emergencies. It should also consider discussing potential solutions with other humanitarian organisations willing to expand their role in emergency response, and with the donors willing to support that expansion. While maintaining a focus that is anchored in operational delivery, MSF should also share its expertise more widely and engage constructively in key discussions to influence humanitarian policy and practice through realistic and pragmatic objectives, particularly at field level.

THE EMERGENCY GAP PROJECT

MSF's two-year Emergency Gap Project has combined policy-driven analysis on the internal dynamics of the humanitarian response to acute conflicts, lessons from MSF's own experience, and reflections on the most prominent crises of recent years. While MSF has a long history of examining the humanitarian sector's performance, the Project departs from previous MSF positions by examining the factors that drive the sector's loss of presence in acute emergencies. *Bridging the emergency gap* draws on the Project's thematic reports and case studies, and consultations with more than 150 senior-level representatives from 60 key organisations across the humanitarian sector.

For more information and to access the full report visit:
https://arhp.msf.es/categories/ emergency-gap

The Centre for Applied Reflection on Humanitarian Practice (ARHP) documents and reflects upon the operational challenges and dilemmas faced by the field teams of the MSF Operational Centre Barcelona (MSF OCBA).

For more information visit the ARHP website: https://arhp.msf.es

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