

## University of Groningen

### Between cause and control

Korff, Valeska Pailin

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

2012

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Korff, V. P. (2012). *Between cause and control: management in a humanitarian organization*. s.n.

**Copyright**

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

**Take-down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*

# 1

## INTRODUCTION: A STUDY OF *MÉDECINS SANS FRONTIÈRES*

### Abstract

Since its foundation in 1971, *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) has grown from an informal assembly of French medical doctors and journalists to one of the most renowned international humanitarian organizations. Over the course of this 40 years history, MSF received both, outstanding praise, most notably in the form of the Nobel prize for peace in 1999, as well as substantial criticism for controversial actions such as the rejection of earmarked funds after the 2006 tsunami disaster. Underlying this state of being admired and criticized at the same time is a degree of independence rare in the humanitarian sector; a field in which donor expectations and a general shift toward professionalization are increasingly restraining organizations' independence and sovereignty. Drawing on the concept of the "actor organization", in this introduction the effort is made to explain why and how MSF managed to remain independent despite increasing external pressures. Four separate studies – Chapters 2 to 5 – that form the core of this dissertation provide the basis to address this question. Each of these studies utilizes distinct theories, methods and data to inquire key aspects of the complex empirical phenomenon. Developing a framework to synthesize the findings generated in these studies, this introductory chapter addresses the outlined research question, while simultaneously embedding and providing an overview of the ensuing chapters of the dissertation.

## 1.1 *Médecins Sans Frontières* – A Startling Organization

On December 26, 2004, an earthquake and ensuing tsunami destroyed the coast lines along the Indian Ocean, taking the lives and livelihoods of hundred thousands of unsuspecting people. This disaster triggered an unprecedented humanitarian response: within days, hundreds of international and local organizations and over \$14 billion in public and private donations were at hand to lend support (Flint & Goyder, 2006). While most international humanitarian nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) scrambled to set up and expand their relief programs (Telford & Cosgrave, 2006), one organization; however, took an extraordinary step that generated much bewilderment within the humanitarian field.

*Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), one of the most renowned humanitarian INGOs, posted a notification on its international website, six days after the tsunami, announcing that its tsunami response was sufficiently funded and that it would not require further financial contributions (MSF, 2004). Keen to honor donors' intentions, yet unwilling to have these determine operations and budgeting, MSF instead asked for donations to be made to its general emergency relief fund, thus allowing for deployment wherever deemed sensible by the organization. This approach drew considerable criticism from the media and other humanitarian organizations such as Action Contre la Faim, UNICEF and Oxfam, who feared that MSF's blunt move would undercut the flow of donations and jeopardize other emergency responses (Bennhold, 2005). Yet, none of this criticism deterred MSF from maintaining that fundraising opportunities and donor sentiment must not compromise its independence and sovereignty over its relief operations (Barbagallo, 2005).

Over the course of its 40 year history, MSF has shown in many other instances that it is a highly independent organization, able to resist outside pressures. It has been successful in maintaining authority over the contents and implementation of its relief projects and organizational processes. This position is not without criticism – in fact MSF is sometimes labeled as “arrogant” and “self-righteous” (Bortolotti, 2004, p. 241) – and far from ordinary. Particularly, in a field where organizations are increasingly under pressure to adhere to standards, subordinate under the authority of coordination bodies, enter into competition for funds and access, and adjust their programs to political agendas (e.g. Borton, 2009; Clark & Ramalingam, 2008; Cooley & Ron, 2002; Lindenberg & Bryant, 2001; Macrae, 2002). It is argued that due to these developments, humanitarian INGOs are losing their agency in terms of autonomy and independence as many of them gradually develop into sub-contractors of governments, while being closely scrutinized by the media and the general public (Davis, 2007; Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Minear, Scott, & Weiss, 1994). In a context of increasing external control of and attention to humanitarian organizations, MSF's strong independent position is puzzling. This prompts the question that is at heart of this dissertation:

*Why and how does MSF maintain independence and sovereignty in a field characterized by increasing external control?*<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, sovereignty and independence are analyzed in terms of organizational behavior, rather than as concepts referring to the role and relations of nation states and international agencies.

MSF's position in the humanitarian sector also generates a theoretical puzzle: how to explain the independent position of this organization in a sector characterized by such strong institutional pressures and external control? This question is challenging since organizations that are subject to increasing external imposition effectively lose control over their boundaries and objectives, thus turning into *agents* or *arenas* (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). Whereas *arenas* are organizations whose members are guided by external norms and standards, *agents* are mere instruments to other organizations. MSF, however, is neither, as we will argue below.

## 1.2 Aims, Sub-Questions and Core Argument of the Study

The basic proposition of this study is that MSF represents the opposite of both *agent* and *arena* types of organizations: it is a particularly *strong social actor organization*. Following Meyer, Boli, and Thomas' (1987) conceptualization of social actors, Brunsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2000, p. 731) define actor organizations as characterized by “independence and sovereignty, with autonomous or self-interested goals, with rational means and qualities, commanding independent resources and having clear boundaries”.

While research on the capacities of actor organizations, particularly with respect to their role as drivers of institutional change has surged (for an overview see Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2009), there is only limited understanding of the conditions and processes through which certain entities become empowered, independent and sovereign actors (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011). This research aims to expand current knowledge of the mechanisms and processes that lead to “strong social actorhood” by means of the in-depth study of one such empowered, independent and sovereign actor - *Médecins Sans Frontières* - in a sector in which organizational actorhood comes unexpectedly. This aim is pursued by: 1) applying multiple theoretical angles to study various core internal and external challenges posed to organizations; 2) focusing on field-, organizational- and individual-level processes and the relation between these; and, 3) utilizing a multi method approach to comprehensively examine the empirical phenomenon.

The core argument of this study is that strong social actorhood can be achieved by means of meeting a dual challenge of internal and external integration (Allmendinger & Hinz, 2002; Barki & Pinsonneault, 2005). Internal integration as the first dimension of this challenge refers to the effort to coordinate employee behavior toward contribution to the collective effort of the organization (Mintzberg, 1979). Such coordination can be achieved either by means of direct control via rules or indirect control through identification with organizational goals, norms and values (Karreman & Alvesson, 2004). Direct control thereby finds expression primarily in the formal governance structure and practices of an organization. Indirect control in contrast is less tangible, yet nevertheless manipulable. Particularly the process of socialization into an organization plays an important role in shaping employees' future identification and commitment. Turning to the second dimension, external integration refers to an organization's effort to establish relations to relevant components of its environment. This includes the establishment of access and control over

vital resources; financial, material and, particularly relevant in a field requiring high skills, flexibility and not the least devotion, human resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Closely related yet of independent relevance is an organization's need to be accepted by important members of its field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Both, controlling resources and generating legitimacy as aspects of external integration are crucial for an organization's survival. This dissertation examines how MSF addresses the dual challenge of internal and external integration, and by doing so enhances its strength as a social actor (see also Table 1.1). The ensuing chapters provide in depths inquiries of different aspects of this phenomenon, with Chapters 2 and 3 focusing on the challenge of internal integration by asking:

- 1) *How does MSF govern its workforce?*
- 2) *How does MSF's socialization program affect employees' attitudes and behavior?*

Chapters 4 and 5 in turn focus on external integration by addressing the questions:

- 3) *Which factors affect employee retention in MSF?*
- 4) *Why and how does MSF remain legitimate despite acting controversially?*

Embedded in a broader research framework, each of the four chapters constitutes a self-contained study, utilizing distinct theories, methods and data to inquire key aspects of the complex empirical phenomenon. This set-up holds the potential to puzzle readers expecting a cohesive narrative around one central argument. Instead, across the ensuing chapters, several independent lines of reasoning will be developed and empirically analyzed. This approach offers the benefit of providing a multifaceted view of one of the most renowned, distinguished, and notoriously independent organizations of the humanitarian field. An organization that, as will be elaborated, exemplifies a “strong social actor”.

In the next section, the characteristics of a strong social actor organization will be explicated and it will be shown that MSF can be considered as such. Subsequently, the dual challenge of internal and external integration will be further elaborated on, first theoretically, and then specifically for the humanitarian sector. In developing this theoretical framework, the introduction lays the ground for a synthesis of the four studies and an attempt to answer the overarching research question. For this end, each study will be briefly introduced in light of the general heuristic. This is followed by a description of the research design, case-study and multimethod empirical approach that is employed in this dissertation and a description of the data sources and analytical methods. The main findings of the four studies are then summarized in relation to the overarching framework of the actor organization. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the identified mechanisms of strong social actorhood and the contributions of this dissertation in terms of theory, methodology and managerial practice in the humanitarian sector.

### **1.3 A Strong Social Actor**

Scott (2003, p. 7) contends that all organizations are actors in so far as they “take actions, utilize resources, enter into contracts and own property”. Other authors such as Brunsson

and Sahlin-Andersson (2000), however, classify organizations as strong social actors only when they have the capacity to act independently and according to their own goals and plans. If organizations do not have this capacity they are at the mercy of powers outside the organization and become *arenas* or *agents*. Three constituent elements need to be realized for an organization to become an actor: identity, hierarchy and rationality. As will be shown, MSF meets these requirements of a strong social actor.

### 1.3.1 Identity

*Identity* has two components. Firstly, organizations need to be able emphasize their similarity with other organizations, irrespective of their precise activities, as members of a certain field. Secondly, organizational identity encompasses distinctiveness or “being special” based on an organization’s purpose, competences, resources, structure, history or culture (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). Balancing both components is necessary for organizational survival in so far as similarity is a basis for legitimacy, while distinctiveness reduces competition (Deephouse, 1999).

MSF prominently features an identity that classifies it as a humanitarian organization, while simultaneously emphasizing its distinctiveness as an organization committed to its own convictions with a critical and reflective approach to existing conventions (Brauman, 2004). This becomes particularly apparent in its “founding myth” (Bortolotti, 2004). According to MSF’s own interpretation, its founding in 1971 constituted an act of opposition against existing humanitarian norms as represented and enacted by the Red Cross – the most established and central of all humanitarian organizations (Dijkzeul, 2004). Having witnessed severe atrocities in the Nigerian civil war as Red Cross volunteers, a number of French doctors together with a group of journalists, decided to set up an organization that would not be bound by the dogmatic neutrality<sup>2</sup> code of the Red Cross, which they felt hampered the effort to reduce the suffering of the victims of this conflict. This new brand of humanitarianism allowed them to publicly denounce those responsible for grave human rights violations, a concept that came to be known as *témoignage* or witnessing. James Orbinski (1999), former international president of MSF, described this motivation as follows:

*“Silence has long been confused with neutrality, and has been presented as a necessary condition for humanitarian action. From its beginning, MSF was created in opposition to this assumption. We are not sure that words can always save lives, but we know that silence can certainly kill.”*

This “founding myth” reflects MSF’s identity as characterized by a strong commitment to humanitarian principles, which enables it to participate as part of the larger humanitarian sector. Yet at the same time, it clearly emphasizes MSF’s distinctiveness by placing an act of

---

<sup>2</sup> A key humanitarian principle, “neutrality” refers to the abstention from any participation in hostilities and controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature in order to continue to enjoy the confidence of all involved parties and secure access to victims on all sides of a conflict (OCHA, 2010). The Red Cross maintains the strictest interpretation, whereas other humanitarian organizations, like MSF, adopted a more open approach emphasizing impartiality while maintaining a right to denounce atrocities (Slim, 1997).

critical and reflective non-conformity, as expressed in the proactive re-interpretation of the neutrality principle at the core of its self-conception.

### 1.3.2 Hierarchy

*Hierarchy* entails that organizations coordinate activities through formal rules and procedural regulations created by an authoritative center. This center consists of managers responsible for the organization, its actions and results, who are encouraged to emphasize the organizations' distinctiveness, thereby manifesting organizational identity.

MSF's current hierarchical structure emerged over the course of its history and as a result of its international expansion over the last 40 years. Starting out as an informal assembly of French doctors and journalists, MSF has since grown into an international organization consisting of 19 national sections in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States. Five of these sections are "Operational Centers" that organize, fund and staff their own humanitarian missions, with the remaining 14 sections contributing financial and human resources and representing the organization within their respective countries. Operational Centers exist in Amsterdam, Barcelona, Brussels, Paris, and Geneva.

All of MSF's sections ascribe to a set of principles expressed in three core documents. These include firstly, the *Charter* (1971), which outlines MSF's fundamental objective, namely "[to provide] assistance to populations in distress, to victims of natural or man-made disasters and to victims of armed conflict". The *Charter* also outlines the central humanitarian principles adhered to during operations which include impartiality, independence, neutrality, and voluntarism<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, the *Chantilly Agreement* (1995) specifically denotes *témoignage* (witnessing) as a principle part of MSF's role as a humanitarian INGO. Thirdly, the *La Mancha Agreement* (2006) specifies MSF's governance structure as an "international associative movement". This refers to the following constellation: each of the 19 national MSF sections has an association comprised mainly of former and current MSF field staff that annually elects a Board of Directors. The Presidents of these boards represent the national associations in the International Council, which functions as MSF's general governing body. The International Council oversees the implementation and strategic direction of MSF's social mission in close cooperation with the 19 sectional Directors. This associative governance structure allows for participation while simultaneously ensuring adherence to the principles outlined in the constitutive documents across all MSF sections.

---

<sup>3</sup> The former are central humanitarian principles, whereby "impartiality" refers to the allocation of humanitarian aid based on need alone and irrespective of race, religion, creed or political convictions. "Independence" concerns the provision of aid autonomous from political, economic, or military objectives (OCHA, 2010). MSF also upholds the principle of "neutrality", yet less dogmatic interpretation than the Red Cross. Finally, "voluntarism" is not a general humanitarian principle, but a distinct value of MSF. Emphasizing the role of volunteers as providers of aid, it refers to the fundamentally altruistic nature of MSF's work. Further detail on humanitarian principles is provided in Chapter 5, Paragraph 5.2.1 - The context: The humanitarian sector and its contested principles.

In addition, MSF's hierarchical structure is reflected in the ongoing standardization of its work processes. Whilst early relief efforts were “small, often poorly coordinated and modest in their success” (Bortolotti, 2004, p. 13), nowadays, MSF follows a clear and structured process with regard to decision making and the implementation of their aid operations (Heyse, 2007). Standardization also pertains to organizational and administrative procedures, as will be discussed in depth in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. These procedures differ to some extent between MSF sections, as each operational center holds authority over the creation of policies and procedural regulations. However, the associative structure of the international organization with its board of directors and core documents facilitates standardization also across MSF sections, thus enabling a hierarchical and formalized organizational structure.

### 1.3.3 Rationality

The final distinguishing feature of the actor organization is *rationality* as referring to the extent to which organizational behavior is goal-directed (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). Rationality is realized via organizations' intentions and strategic efforts to achieve specific goals and purposes. It is fostered by focusing on a limited number or even one abstract focal goal based on which past and present actions are justified.

MSF's goals are outlined in its core documents and specified in regularly created strategic plans denoting focal concerns and activities for periods of three years. These goals are at the core of MSF's decision making concerning emergency responses. While there are instances in which previous choices or external expectations influence operational decisions, the decision of where and how to respond is largely based on MSF's own systematic appraisal of emergency situations in relation to their organizational goals and capacities (Heyse, 2007 – see also Chapter 5). Given that overall humanitarian INGOs are increasingly under pressure to implement donor specifications and preferences (Davis, 2007), such autonomous decision-making not only reflects rationality, but indicates the high degree of independence MSF exhibits (Dijkzeul, 2004).

### 1.3.4 Independence and sovereignty as an actor

The combination of a distinctive and strong identity, a hierarchal structure and adherence to rationality, is constitutive for strong social actor organizations and facilitates their independence, autonomy and sovereignty (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

MSF's features of a strong social actor give the organization substantial capacity to independently respond to emergencies worldwide. Over the course of its 40 year history, MSF has emerged as one of the technically best equipped humanitarian INGOs, with extensive financial resources and considerable expertise in emergency health care, and an ability to respond to emergencies almost anywhere within 48 hours (Redfield, 2005). Its exemplary position in the field was recognized when MSF received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999 and was labeled as “the most important humanitarian [organization]”, as well as “conscience of the humanitarian world” (Rieff, 2002: 83). Taken together, exhibiting



characteristics of a strong social actor appears to be at the core of MSF's ability to maintain independence and sovereignty in a sector whose members face increasing pressure to adhere to external demands and standards.

#### 1.4 The Dual Challenge of Strong Social Actors: Internal and External Integration

An organization constitutes a social context within which its members act, and is as an entity itself embedded within the social context of its environment (Allmendinger & Hinz, 2002). From this arises a *dual challenge of integration*. Mastering this challenge facilitates strong social actorhood.

Integration pertains to the process by which distinct and separate entities form a unified system with a shared objective (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1969). This process occurs within as well as between organizations (Barki & Pinsonneault, 2005). The former refers to the effort to coordinate the behavior of organizational members in a way that contributes to the collective effort of the organization (Mintzberg, 1979). The latter refers to the process by which an organization establishes relations with other components in its field, including “suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). Taken together, an organization has to accomplish a dual feat of integration: *internally* by integrating its members into the organizational context and *externally*, by integrating itself into its environment. Mastering this challenge enables an organization to establish its identity, hierarchy and rationality and as such gain strength as a social actor.

In the following, the challenge of internal and external integration is further specified and applied to the context of the humanitarian sector. On the basis of this, the sub questions to be addressed in Chapters 2 – 5 of this dissertation are formulated.

##### 1.4.1 Internal integration

The fundamental purpose and challenge of all organizations is to establish cooperation among their individual members (Mintzberg, 1979; Ouchi, 1979). Establishing cooperation in the sense of a systematic collective effort toward the implementation of organizational objectives requires the control and coordination of members' activities (Van de Ven, Delbecq, & Koenig, 1976). An organization, or more specifically, its management, can apply different strategies to influence and coordinate members. This refers to efforts to either control members' behavior directly or indirectly by shaping members' beliefs and facilitating identification with organizational goals, norms and values. Karreman and Alvesson (2004) term these modes of control *technocratic* and *socio-ideological* respectively.

*Technocratic control* refers to the effort to directly and purposefully influence members' behavior by means of formal rules and standards. As such it relates to the structure and content of employee governance in an organization and is achieved through the standardization and codification of work procedures and processes, the specification of relevant skills, performance monitoring and supervision (Mintzberg, 1983). Technocratic

control can be exerted by supervising managers, embedded in the technology of work and the rules and regulations surrounding it, and integrated in professional codes and ethics. The design of formal, technocratic means of control reveals a fundamentally instrumental orientation in so far as it is based on the idea that organizational members act rationally in pursuit of their goals and therefore can be guided by means of incentives and sanctions that favor desired behavior (Etzioni, 1980).

*Socio-ideological control* in turn is normatively oriented, and views employees as motivated to act in accordance with organizational needs because they identify with and are committed to the goals of the organization (Etzioni, 1980). These goals include the economic purpose of for profit organizations as well as the social causes or “missions” of nonprofits. Identification is facilitated by managerial efforts to define interpretations and shape employees’ experiences (Alvesson & Karreman, 2004). Newcomers’ socialization into an organization is an important component of this process (Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007). Specifically, institutionalized socialization in the form of structured socialization programs implemented by the organization constitutes an expedient strategy to facilitate new employees’ adjustment to the organization (Jones, 1986; Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007). Symbolic rewards and relational signals that signify the importance of the relationship between the organization and the employee are further important means to facilitate commitment and identification with the organization (Lindenberg, 2003; Wittek, 1999).

### ***Organizational control in the humanitarian sector***

Traditionally, governance in humanitarian organizations has been characterized by relatively informal means of socio-ideological control. Due to the normative nature of aid work, the uncertainty of the context and the professional background of many aid workers, a control mode that allows for flexibility and emphasizes employees’ voluntary conformity is considered a suitable approach to humanitarian governance (Hopgood, 2008; Quéinnec, 2003). In this view, aid workers’ are assumed to be motivated primarily by a deep commitment to humanitarian organizations’ mission of relieving human suffering and hence, inherently willing to actively contribute efforts to this cause. Increasingly, however, the idea of the “professionalization” of aid work is gaining momentum within the field (Walker, 2004). Professionalization refers to the establishment of aid work as a profession with standardized career paths and a professional association for humanitarian aid workers. Important components of this endeavor are the specification of core competences, development of coherent educational tracks, formalization of occupational standards, and the establishment of a certification system for humanitarian qualifications (Walker & Russ, 2010). While by no means opposed to socio-ideological control, such professionalization efforts clearly involve aspects of technocratic control like a formalized employment relation as well as a focus on qualifications and performance. Hopgood’s (2008, p. 114) critique of professionalization as favoring “technicians” over “idealists” expresses the unease that this development evokes among those with a more traditional interpretation of humanitarian work as an expression of a person’s commitment to the humanitarian cause and hence centered around altruism, voluntarism and informality.

### ***Examining internal integration in MSF***

The conceptualization of socio-ideological and technocratic control as opposing and mutually exclusive modes of control, which is also reflected in Hopgood's (2008) criticism of professionalization, is in fact a common (mis)interpretation present in the theoretical literature (Alvesson & Karreman, 2004). Assuming that certain forms of control are associated with particular types of organizations or periods in the organizational life cycle (see e.g. Mintzberg, 1983; Ouchi, 1979), neglects that in many cases technocratic and socio-ideological control mechanisms not only coexist, but in fact complement one another (Karreman & Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson & Karreman, 2004). Following this approach, the analysis of mechanisms of internal integration in MSF does not seek to identify whether technocratic *or* socio-ideological control is exerted, but rather to explore how both approaches contribute to coordination (see also Table 1.1).

*Chapter 2* of this dissertation focuses on the technocratic mode of control and examines MSF's governance system. The central research question asks: *How does MSF – or more specifically, the national section of MSF Holland<sup>4</sup> – govern its workforce?* Analyzing the human resource architecture in terms of human resource philosophies, policies, practices and processes (Kepes & Delery, 2007); this study provides a basis to assess the extent to which MSF Holland's governance system reflects distinct perspectives on the management of humanitarian personnel. More specifically, this study examines how MSF Holland navigates potential cross-pressures originating from three templates of HRM governance: a) an universalist approach of applying "best practices" of human resource management (Pfeffer, 1998), b) a contingency approach of aiming to adjust human resource management to the distinctive features and context of the organization (Baron & Kreps, 1999), or, c) an "idealist" approach that opposes strategic management and instead advocates informal structures emphasizing the voluntary and altruistic nature of aid work (Hopgood, 2008). This analysis of the structure and content of the governance system allows an appraisal of the extent to which MSF Holland applies technocratic means of control such as standardized procedures, incentive and sanctioning schemes as well as skill appraisal and development in order to coordinate the activities of its members.

*Chapter 3* focuses on the socio-ideological mode of control by analyzing the socialization process in MSF Holland. A crucial component of this process is an intensive eight day introduction course that familiarizes newcomers with the ideology, objectives and organizational and operational practices of MSF Holland. The question addressed in this sub study is: *How does MSF's socialization program affect newcomers' adjustment, attitudes and behavior?* Standard theories of organizational socialization (Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007) reason that socialization programs reduce uncertainty and enhance value congruence, thereby positively affecting role clarity, role conflict and person-organization fit, as well as job satisfaction, performance and retention. Goal-framing theory (Lindenberg, 2001a; 2001b) is added as a novel approach to conceptualize the mechanisms of

---

<sup>4</sup> The majority of the empirical research focused on MSF Holland, one of MSF's 19 national section and, as the Operational Centre Amsterdam, the authoritative center for the sections in Canada, Germany and the UK.

socialization, namely in terms of motivation affirmation. To test this assumption, the study examines whether institutionalized socialization enhances the extent to which employees experience their work as enjoyable and meaningful. By focusing on employees' perception of their work and how this perception is influenced through the socialization program, this study examines a crucial component of socio-ideological control and the related effort to facilitate employees' identification with the goals of the organization.

#### 1.4.2 External integration

Organizations exist within larger social, economic, technical, political, legal and cultural environments, which they have to navigate and manage in order to implement their objectives (Hall & Tolbert, 2005). This coordination of external factors involves instrumental as well as normative rationalities (Paauwe, 2004; Paauwe & Boselie, 2007). First, an organization needs to acquire and maintain vital resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Second, an organization has to generate legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Resource dependency theory and neo-institutionalism provide heuristics to conceptualize the distinctive challenges involved in these processes.

*Resource dependency theory* contends that the environment contains scarce and vital resources (financial, material, and human resources) and information, which organizations require in order to implement their objectives. The extent to which an organization has direct control over and access to resources determines its power and hence, capacity for self-determination. Organizations that depend upon other organizations as providers of vital resources face the risk of potentially being subjected to external control by their supplier, thus in danger of becoming restricted in their autonomy (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Accordingly, organizations are faced with the challenge of managing the uncertainty and external control arising from dependencies (Davis & Powell, 1992). Resource dependency theory suggests a number of tactics organizations can deploy in order to reduce dependency. First, organizations can seek to diversify their resource base, thus reducing the reliance on a sole provider. Second, cooperation and alliances with other organizations offer mutual support and the possibility to share resources. Third, mergers and acquisitions foresee the incorporation of suppliers into the organization, thereby facilitating direct access to resources. Despite involving certain constraints, these tactics constitute powerful strategies to establish control over vital resources, thus enhancing organizational autonomy (Davis & Cobb, 2010).

Rather than focusing on material constraints arising from the environment, *neo-institutional theory* emphasizes the role of cultural conditions in the sense of institutionalized rules, norms and expectations (Scott, 2008). The basic underlying assumption is that in order to survive, organizations need to establish legitimacy by conforming to expectations in their institutional environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; 1991). Pressures for conformity are exerted by regulatory agencies such as the state and the professions, by the leading organizations in a field as well as by cultural expectations in the society in which the organization functions (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). However, while strong, external

pressures are not necessarily definitive, with organizations varying in terms of resilience to external influence. Explanations for incomplete conformity focus on two dimensions: fragmentation and agency. The first perspective maintains that the institutional environment is often characterized by fragmentation (Meyer & Scott, 1983). Fragmentation is attributed to multiple or even conflicting institutional logics (Purdy & Gray, 2009), multiple stakeholders and constituents (Lounsbury, 2001) or ambiguous practices (Goodrick & Salancik, 1996). The resulting ambiguity allows organizations to exercise discretion in their response to external expectations. The second focus is on the agency of organizations. Agency can be exercised to cope with, or even oppose, external pressures in order to protect the organization or to generate resources. Oliver (1991) suggests a variety of strategies which organizations employ in their response to institutional expectations, spanning from acquiescence over avoidance to manipulation. Research on controversial and illegitimate organizational behavior also adds the concept of legitimation of nonconformity through impression management (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992).

### ***Resource constraints and institutional expectations in the humanitarian sector***

Over the last decades, the humanitarian sector underwent fundamental transformations. These consisted of interlinked changes in the institutional environment of the sector as well as the resource base of humanitarian organizations. A brief chronological account illustrates these interlinked changes.

A basic development concerns the growth of the sector as reflected in the number of organizations, staff, and available funds. Since the end of the Cold War, the number and size of humanitarian organizations increased substantially as established organizations expanded and new ones entered the field (Clarke & Ramalingam, 2008). Similarly, the financial resources for humanitarian action grew from US \$ 2.1 billion in 1990 to US \$ 18 billion in 2008 (Development Initiatives, 2009; Randal & German, 2002). The majority of these funds are provided by a “pool of wealthy, industrialized countries linked to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)” (Walker & Pepper, 2007, p. 33). Increasingly though, new donors such as non-OECD countries and private providers have come to contribute to the joint mechanisms and codes of the humanitarian financing system. While no reliable data is available, estimates see these contributions amounting to about 10% to 15% of the humanitarian budget (Randal & German, 2002; Walker & Pepper, 2007). Growth also occurred in terms of the number of aid workers. Rising by 77% since 1997, in 2005 there were 241,654 persons employed in aid operations (Stoddard, Harmer & Haver, 2006).

In the frame of these developments, international humanitarian non-governmental organizations (INGOs) increasingly gained relevance as providers of humanitarian aid (Buchanan-Smith, 2003). This is reflected in their share of humanitarian expenditure as well as staff. In 2008, for example, humanitarian INGOs were allocated about one third (US \$ 5.7 billion) of all official humanitarian funds and employed the majority of all humanitarian field personnel (ALNAP, 2010). In addition, they received between US \$2 and \$5 billion in

private, direct donations, indicating that about half of all humanitarian funding flowed through INGOs (Walker & Pepper, 2007).

An important factor for the rise of INGOs was the crisis in the European welfare states and the resulting transfer of government tasks to civil society actors in the 1980s and 1990s. INGOs were believed to be better capable in reaching the poor and to be more cost-effective because of their flexibility, their specific expertise, and their small scale approach to development (Gordenker & Weiss, 1997; Smith, 1996). However, with increasing relevance and capacity came new expectations and intensified scrutiny from the environment. As Davis (2007, p. 7) puts it: “[a]s financing grew, so did donors’ expectations about what they would get in return – transforming them from donors into principals”. The increased earmarking of funds for particular crises or activities by donors reflected this development (Randal & German, 2002). While particularly prominent among the large providers of humanitarian funds such as the DAC countries; the changed attitude to donation also took hold in the general public. The emergence of nonprofit “watchdog” organizations such as Charity Navigator<sup>5</sup> and the discussion of concepts like “strategic philanthropy” or “philanthropic investor” indicated the rise of transparency and effectiveness concerns among private donors in the nonprofit sector generally. Overall, this process reflected a fundamental change as it led to increased pressures for rationalization and professionalization in the sector (Hwang & Powell, 2009, analyze this process for nonprofits generally). Given the fact that humanitarian INGOs relied exclusively on donor contributions – private and public, their resource dependency required them to be receptive to the changing ideas and norms of their donors (Lewis, 2003; Quéinnec, 2003).

One development in particular informed these changing norms. The involvement of humanitarian INGOs surged in the humanitarian crises in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia, particularly Bosnia-Herzegovina, during the mid-1990s (Buchanan-Smith, 2003). These crises also came to highlight tragic shortcomings and failures of humanitarian action, which would eventually trigger a fundamental reevaluation of humanitarianism. Concluding that many more lives could have been saved if humanitarian organizations had better coordinated their activities and acted more professionally, the interagency evaluation of the humanitarian response to the crisis in Rwanda set the ground for a new focus on *accountability* (Hilhorst, 2002).

Underlying the call for accountability was a fundamental shift in the vision of humanitarian ethics (Barnett & Weiss, 2008). Abandoning the idea of an inherent morality of humanitarian action, relief efforts are increasingly evaluated based on a result-based ethic, emphasizing performance outcomes and adherence to general quality standards such as those outlined in the Sphere Project’s “Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response” (Buchanan-Smith, 2003; Slim, 1997). In this context, the importance of human

---

<sup>5</sup> A recent study by Cnaan, Jones, Dickin, and Salomon (2011) however revealed that the vast majority of private donors did not access information provided by watchdog organizations on the effectiveness of various nonprofits prior to making a donation. While providing counter evidence against assertions that effectiveness concerns have generally risen among private donors, the existence of watchdog organizations nevertheless urges nonprofits to adhere to certain standards of fund allocation and transparency.

resources and the management of aid workers increasingly came into focus. Evaluation reports highlighted the relation between qualified and experienced staff and the quality of relief efforts, yet also showed that humanitarian INGOs experience substantial difficulties in recruiting and particularly retaining competent personnel (ALNAP, 2002; Loquercio, Hammersley, & Emmens, 2006). The increased value attached to human resources in humanitarian work was also reflected in the founding of *People in Aid*, an organization aimed at improving personnel management in the humanitarian field, in 1995.

Taken together, since the mid-1990s, the humanitarian sector grew substantially, in terms of funds, staff, and number of organizations. In the course of this extension, humanitarian organizations' reliance on donors increased as did the pressure to conform to principles of efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and accountability in the provision of aid (Edwards & Hulme, 1996). The notion that good will alone does not suffice, but needs to be backed by professionalism in operations and management has become a common conviction within the sector, promulgated by donors, supporting organizations such as People in Aid, interagency initiatives like the Sphere Project or the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Aid (ALNAP), and not the least, by humanitarian organizations themselves. All of these developments particularly affected INGOs, which gained relevance as providers of humanitarian aid, yet also came under increasing scrutiny by their donors, both public and private, and other members of the field. In effect, the general tendency towards "managerialism" in their environment compelled humanitarian INGOs to not only demonstrate financial accountability to their donors, but also to design, implement and evaluate their operations as well as their organizational and management procedures according to external conceptualizations of professionalism and accountability (Clarke & Ramalingam, 2008; Davis, 2007; Edwards & Hulme, 1996).

### ***Examining external integration in MSF***

The above outline describes in short the organizational environment humanitarian INGOs have to navigate, in terms of gaining access to vital resources and generating legitimacy as accepted providers of aid. With the increasing relevance attributed to skilled and experienced staff as determinant of the quality of aid provision, human resources have become a crucial asset beside the financial contributions of donors. Legitimacy in turn came to be evaluated in terms of conformity with standards of effectiveness, transparency and accountability, rather than based on the inherent morality of the humanitarian cause and its principles alone. The examination of mechanisms of external integration takes heed of these developments and analyzes firstly, how MSF manages to obtain vital human resources and secondly, how MSF's autonomy and independence is legitimated in a context of increasing conformity pressures.

*Chapter 4* examines the resource base and focuses on MSF's access to human, rather than financial or material resources. Motivated by the increasing relevance attributed to staff for the quality of aid provision and problems identified concerning high turnover rates among humanitarian personnel, this study addresses the question: *Which factors affect employee retention in MSF Holland?* Conceptualizing retention as influenced by opportunity structures (Rosenfeld, 1992), the analytical focus lies on aid workers' prospective employment

opportunities, and experienced as well as anticipated constraints arising from humanitarian work. Relevant factors include individual characteristics such as gender, age, partnership status, nationality and occupation. These in turn indicate the relative attractiveness of employment in MSF in comparison to employment within a person's national labor market or the private sector. Employment constraints contingent on humanitarian work are defined as the characteristics of the humanitarian mission such as the location relative to the employees' home country, and the security risk. By analyzing the factors that impact retention in MSF, this study illustrates the challenges and potential solutions in maintaining the crucial resource of experienced personnel.

*Chapter 5* analyzes MSF's approach to the generation of legitimacy. An empirical puzzle underlies this effort: MSF is clearly regarded as a legitimate humanitarian organization, despite having repeatedly engaged in controversial acts that drew criticism within the humanitarian field. Accordingly, the overarching question asks: *Why and how does MSF remain legitimate despite acting controversially?* A theoretical framework first specifies the content of controversial behavior, then elaborates on the organizational features which enable such behavior, and finally presents strategies applied to legitimize controversial acts. The concept of *organizational exceptionalism* is developed in order to classify a certain type of controversial organizational behavior that is characterized by the purposeful, proactive and public defiance of common operational standards and conventions of an organizational field. The concept of the *actor organization* (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000) is discussed in relation to how MSF is able to engage in such behavior (see paragraph 1.2 for an elaboration of the concept). As a strong social actor, having a strong identity, hierarchy and rationality provides an organization with the capacity for exceptional behavior and the autonomy to act accordingly. Finally, concerning legitimation strategies, a new form of impression management (Schlenker, 1980) is introduced: *legitimacy by exceptionalism*, which is defined as the effort to reframe controversial acts in terms of alternative, yet legitimate means or goals. The latter provides direct insights into the legitimation strategies applied by MSF, thus allowing for the exploration of a crucial mechanism of external integration: the generation of legitimacy.

## 1.5 Research Design, Data and Analytical Methods

### 1.5.1 A case study research design

The research design was developed to answer the specific questions of the four sub-studies, which necessitated the examination of different levels of analysis (the humanitarian field, the organization and its employees) and multiple methods of data collection. The overarching approach is a case-study: MSF was chosen for examination because of its distinct position as an independent and sovereign organization within the humanitarian field. Case studies facilitate the in-depth exploration of complex phenomena including possible mechanisms and relations and contain detailed and multiple sources of data and methodologies (Yin, 1984). Furthermore, revelatory case designs are suitable to generate distinctive findings concerning the reasons for the particularity of a case (Patton, 1990).



In order to address the different levels and processes of organizational integration and its relation to MSF becoming a strong social actor, a *multimethod approach* to data collection and analysis was applied. Such a comprehensive approach involving diverse data sources and means of analysis enabled cross-checking results, thereby enhancing the validity of findings (Brewer & Hunter, 2005). Validity could also be enhanced by regularly verifying and discussing results of analyses with representatives of MSF's HRM department. On several occasions, the research team, including the author, had the unique opportunity to present their results to members of the HRM department which allowed for the collection of feedback and consequently the integration of this feedback into the research process.

### 1.5.2 Data

In general, all data were obtained from the Dutch section of MSF. MSF Holland is one of MSF's 19 national sections and as the Operational Center Amsterdam (OCA) a central hub in the organization's international structure. There are in total five Operational Centers, which, though connected through MSF's mission and principles, are largely independent of each other in terms of fund raising, recruitment, and operations. All Operational Centers coordinate with a number of partner sections, which in the case of MSF Holland/OCA include the MSF sections in the UK, Germany and Canada. These partner sections do not conduct own aid projects, but support the operations of the Operational Centers through recruitment, fund-raising and advocacy in their respective countries. Most organizational activity therefore is concentrated in the Operational Centers, which are solely responsible for the organization and administration of aid operations. Yet, despite this division, MSF nevertheless remains an international organization. The International Council, which includes representatives of all Operational Centers and partner sections, is MSF's coordinating body and while it does not have direct decision making authority over concrete aid operations, it monitors and ensures adherence to MSF's core principles (Reijn, 2007). The current organizational structure of MSF International evolved over time, originating from of a group of French doctors and journalists, who set up the first MSF section – MSF France – in 1971 (see also paragraph 1.3.1.). Further sections followed, with MSF Holland being founded in 1984 by a group of six volunteers, who set up office in an Amsterdam cellar (De Milliano, 1991). From these humble beginnings, MSF Holland has developed into one of the central hubs of MSF, Operational Center Amsterdam, an organization with a workforce exceeding 7,000 employees, conducting more than 70 aid projects worldwide and with an annual income of over 121 million Euros (Annual Report, 2009).

Over a period of one and a half years, from January 2008 until July 2009, several researchers, including the author, were present at MSF Holland's Amsterdam headquarters, collecting data and partaking in the everyday life of the organization. During this time, the researchers were granted extensive access to organizational material, including internal and confidential documents. This unusual openness was facilitated by the long established relation between MSF Holland and the research group (Heyse, 2007) and allowed compiling an extensive case-study, which consisted of organizational documents, expert interviews, observation and a personnel database, which were in turn combined with secondary sources.

### ***Organizational documents***

The primary data sources were documents created by the organization, which were collected in a variety of forms.

*Formal and informal documents on human resource management* such as policies and procedural guidelines, memos and briefing papers, information material and policy proposals were of particular relevance. These documents were collected via an extensive search covering all of MSF Holland's sources on human resource management policies: the human resource department's internal hard drive, the "treasury" CD, which is an annually updated compilation of material distributed to all of MSF Holland's field projects, as well as MSF Holland's intranet (internal network for employees). Data collection followed a systematic selection process involving four stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of the relevant material (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & The PRISMA Group, 2009), which is described in detail in Chapter 2. The resulting database comprised of 424 formal and 151 informal human resource management documents, which were used to examine the governance structure of MSF Holland (Chapter 2) and the standardization typical for actor organizations (Chapter 5).

*Strategy papers and annual reports* created in the period 1996 to 2009 were another important data source since they constituted more general accounts of organizational objectives, strategies and self-reflection, and provided information on financial resources. This data source was of particular relevance for the analysis of the governance system (Chapter 2) and the examination of MSF as an exceptional and strong actor organization (Chapter 5). An overview of those organizational documents directly referred to throughout this study is provided at the end of the reference list.

Comprehensive end of mission *performance evaluations* of 78 employees provided detailed individual-level data. The evaluations were not randomly collected, but sampled using a matched pair sampling strategy (Heckman, Ichimura, & Todd, 1998) in order to allow for a comparison between participants and non-participants of MSF Holland's introduction course for new field staff. These appraisal forms provided two sources of information. First, they allowed the examination of the employees' perception of the work experience in terms of task clarity, supervision, team integration, the relation between expectations and reality, and job satisfaction. Second, they permitted an examination of the line manager's appraisal of employees' skills, performance, and future prospects in the organization. These comprehensive accounts constituted a unique basis to examine the attitudes, capacities and experiences of MSF Holland's field staff, thus allowing the examination of the perception of the organization among its members. Individual performance evaluations were used to analyze the effects of the socialization program (Chapter 3).

### ***Expert interviews***

During the research period, 20 expert interviews were conducted with 18 organizational members, primarily between January and March 2008 in MSF Holland's human resource department. A detailed description of the characteristics of those interviewed and the

content of these interviews is provided in Chapter 2. Mainly exploratory in nature, these interviews covered various topics relating to the organization's history, personnel management, change processes, structure, objectives, and challenges. Information obtained through interviews was primarily used in the context of the examination of MSF Holland's governance system (Chapter 2). More specifically, the data collected in the expert interviews was utilized to validate the information obtained through policy related documents. As described in Chapter 2, human resource policies and the related set of practices identified in the document analysis were enquired about during the interviews.

### ***Observation***

Observation was conducted in two forms. First, in 2008 and 2009, members of the research group were regularly present in the organization and engaged in general organizational activities and meetings. In the first six months of 2008, three researchers visited the organization on a weekly basis, for two or three days per week. The author was present for a period of 9 months, for 2 days a week, from March to July 2008, as well as from January to April of 2009. The researchers were granted office space in the HRM department - which promoted regular contact with the HRM staff -; sat in at weekly HRM meetings when possible, joined the daily lunch break, and frequently attended daily update meetings on MSF's field operations. Although not treated as employees (and thus more strictly observers than participant observers in many cases), members of the research group often had the opportunity to discuss and present material during meetings and get acquainted with members of the HRM department.

Second, the author of this study attended MSF Holland's eight day introduction (socialization) program for new field employees in July 2009. This intensive experience not only provided substantial information about MSF's history, its understanding of humanitarianism, and the way the organization portrays its identity to newcomers, it also provided an immediate and personal impression of the socialization process, which is analyzed in Chapter 3 of this study. Providing information on MSF's self-portrayal and organizational identity, the data collected through participation in the socialization program also benefited the examination of MSF as an actor organization (Chapter 5).

### ***Personnel database***

MSF Holland's personnel database was another important data source and was utilized in two ways. First, it was used as a sampling frame to generate the matched pair sample used to test effects of attending the socialization program (Chapter 3). Second, it was used to examine employee retention and the factors influencing it (Chapter 3 & 4). The personnel database was created by MSF Holland for administrative purposes and required extensive restructuring and matching in order to enable statistical analysis. It contains demographic information about the employee (age, gender, marital status, nationality, occupation), but also the detailed labor market history information and mission information (location, number of missions), including detailed information about each mission. The employment histories of

1,955 field workers employed by the organization from January 2003 until December 2009 were examined for the analysis of factors influencing retention, which is described in detail in Chapter 4.

### ***Secondary sources***

Secondary sources provided additional information on the organization, its actions and rationales as well as its embeddedness within the humanitarian sector. These sources were of particular relevance for the analysis of MSF's exceptionality within its field as inquired in Chapter 5. Sources included firstly, academic publications that focus on MSF as a case study, such as those of Bortolotti (2004), Heyse (2007), Hilhorst and Schiemann (2002), and Reijn (2007). Secondly, expert accounts of humanitarian workers provided information on MSF's history and reputation (see for example De Milliano, 1991; Rieff, 2002; Terry, 2002). Finally, external sources on security risk (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2011) and human development levels (UNDP, 2011) were used to assess contextual conditions and constraints in the analysis in Chapter 4.

### **1.5.3 Analytical Methods**

The diversity of research questions that were asked and data that were collected demanded the use of a variety of analytical techniques, including *qualitative* and *quantitative* methods.

#### ***Qualitative methods***

Qualitative methods were used to analyze formal human resource management documents and expert interviews (Chapter 2), performance evaluations (Chapter 3) and general organizational documents in the form of memos and briefings, strategy papers and reports (Chapter 5).

With regard to the analysis of HRM documents and performance evaluations standard steps of the qualitative analysis of textual data were followed, which included: sampling within documents, identifying themes, building a codebook, marking the text, constructing a model (i.e., relationships among codes) and testing these models against previous theoretical expectations (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The large sampling of documents and performance evaluations – or corpus of texts – was discussed in detail previously. Sampling within the documents refers to the fact that each document was classified as a “thematic unit” of analysis (Krippendorff, 1982, p. 62), and that each document could have multiple coding entries. In a second stage, multiple coders were used to identify themes in the respective documents, which were recognized by reading the text and isolating recurrent themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In a third stage, a codebook was developed, which was an organized hierarchical list, and included a description of each code as well as inclusion and exclusion criteria (Dey, 1993; Miles & Huberman, 1994). In step four, the text was marked by assigning codes to the contiguous units of texts. In the final stage, the models developed through the coding scheme were tested against previous theoretical expectations. Disagreement between coders was solved by means of regular discussions of coded material.

In order to analyze MSF Holland's governance system (Chapter 2), the formal human resource management related documents ( $n = 424$ ) were recorded and coded by publication date and human resource management domain addressed. The development of a coding scheme enabled the creation and visualization of a chronological overview of the formalization process, and the identification of domains which received particular attention. The data collected in the expert interviews were utilized to validate the information obtained through policy related documents.

The analysis of effects of attending MSF Holland's socialization program (Chapter 3) required the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. This involved the systematic content coding of the information available in the form of performance evaluations. In order to generate the relevant outcome variables such as role clarity, role conflict, person-organization fit, personal enjoyment, sense of significance and job satisfaction, a coding system was developed based on established survey measures (Galindo-Kuhn & Guzley, 2001; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Kalleberg, 1974; Kristof, 1996; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Performance measurements were directly adopted from the evaluation forms, whereas retention was measured objectively as the number of missions recorded in the personnel database. The values from the coded performance evaluations were then transformed into numerical format. Furthermore, information obtained through participant observation and related organizational documents, was used to classify MSF Holland's introduction program for new field staff as a form of institutionalized socialization.

The inquiry of exceptional organizational behavior and legitimation strategies in MSF (Chapter 5) was also predominantly qualitative. Drawing on a variety of sources, the analytical approach consisted primarily of direct interpretation of textual data available in the form of strategy papers and annual reports, field notes prepared during participation in the socialization program, and secondary sources.

### ***Quantitative analyses***

Quantitative analyses were used in Chapter 3 to analyze effects of MSF's socialization program and in Chapter 4 in the examination of factors affecting retention. As previously described, in Chapter 3, the coded performance evaluations ( $n = 78$ ) were transformed into numerical format. This data were then transferred into a statistical program (SPSS) in order to conduct non-parametric tests for matched samples, namely McNemar and Wilcoxon signed rank test (McNemar, 1947; Wilcoxon, 1945). This analysis was conducted to analyze differences between participants and non-participants of the socialization program.

Further quantitative analyses were conducted in the study of employee retention (Chapter 4). Using the personnel database discussed previously, a logistic regression analysis ( $n = 1,955$ ) of reenlistment for a second mission was estimated (Agresti, 1990). The model included two sets of variables: firstly, factors relating to the specific context of humanitarian missions (cultural and geographic proximity, security, early return, plus mission location as a control), and secondly, individual characteristics of the employee (age, gender, partnership status, occupation and nationality). To test model fit, a log-likelihood ratio test was applied to

ensure that the model was a significant improvement to the null model. Following this, the model was classified by checking predicted values in relation to actual values, thus identifying model specificity and sensitivity. Moreover, in preliminary analyses, a stepwise approach was conducted of inserting each variable separately to test whether it significantly improved model fit.

**Table 1.1** Summary of the Research Model

	A Dual Challenge of Integration			
	Internal Integration		External Integration	
	Chapter 2	Chapter 3	Chapter 4	Chapter 5
<b>Analytical Primacy</b>	Technocratic mode of control	Socio-ideological mode of control	Resource base	Legitimation strategy
<b>Research Question</b>	How does MSF govern its workforce?	How does MSF's socialization program affect employees' attitudes and behavior?	Which factors affect employee retention in MSF?	Why and how does MSF remain legitimate despite acting controversially?
<b>Theoretical Framework</b>	Perspectives of HRM: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Universalist</li> <li>• Contingency</li> <li>• Idealist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Socialization theories (uncertainty reduction/value congruence)</li> <li>• Goal-framing theory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment opportunities and constraints</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neo-institutional theory</li> <li>• Impression management</li> </ul>
<b>Data &amp; Methods</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis of human resource management related organizational documents</li> <li>• Expert interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participant observation</li> <li>• Content coding of employee performance evaluations</li> <li>• Matched pair sample</li> <li>• McNemar and Wilcoxon signed rank test</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Logistic regression of individual and mission specific factors on aid workers' reenlistment for a 2<sup>nd</sup> humanitarian mission</li> <li>• Personnel database</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis of organizational documents (particularly strategy papers and reports)</li> <li>• Secondary sources</li> </ul>

## 1.6 Summary of Findings

In the context of the dissertation research, four separate studies were conducted, each of which highlights a distinctive aspect of MSF's approach to the dual challenge of internal and external integration. Synthesizing these studies allows addressing the overarching research question of why and how MSF maintains independence and sovereignty in a field

characterized by increasing external control. For this purpose, the findings of the four studies are first summarized and subsequently examined in terms of the insights provided regarding how MSF's coordinates its members internally and navigates its environment externally.

### **1.6.1 Chapter 2: How does MSF govern its workforce?**

The comprehensive analysis of organizational documents and information obtained through interviews paints a picture of MSF Holland's governance system as: a) extensively formalized, with regulations and procedural guidelines specifying and controlling basically all aspects of the employment relation, b) reflecting the explicit effort to "professionalize" human resource management (e.g., compensation policies and incentive schemes intended to attract, retain and support qualified staff); and c) shaped by different and sometimes diverging interpretations and motives concerning personnel management. In particular, tensions arise between operational requirements calling for staffing flexibility and the ambition to be a "responsible employer". In sum, observations indicate that MSF applies a hybrid approach reflecting different management perspectives. Many elements of MSF's governance structure are in line with a contingency approach of aiming to align organizational policies and processes to the cultural, economic or legal environment of the organization and the characteristics of its workforce. However, a pronounced emphasis on the voluntary nature of the work and employees' intrinsic motivation shows that principles of an idealist approach remain relevant.

Relating these findings back to the challenge of internal integration, the above analysis indicates that MSF coordinates its employees by combining both a technocratic and a socio-ideological mode of control. A high degree of formalization of human resource management, regular and comprehensive performance evaluation practices, a highly selective recruitment process, and non-monetary incentive systems are an expression of a technocratic approach to governance. At the same time, the philosophy underlying MSF's approach to governance emphasizes high intrinsic motivation and a commitment to the humanitarian cause, and regards staff as qualified professionals, which is associated with socio-ideological control.

### **1.6.2 Chapter 3: How does MSF's socialization program affect employees' attitudes and behavior?**

The systematic comparison of participants and non-participants of MSF Holland's introduction program in relation to newcomer adjustment showed that participants experienced their work as more meaningful and enjoyable than non-participants. They also reported higher job satisfaction and went on more subsequent missions, thus showing a positive effect on retention. However, no effects could be observed in terms of role clarity, role conflict, person-organization fit and performance. These findings extend the scope of previous socialization theories, which assume that socialization programs are effective if they reduce uncertainty and person-organization misfit. However, it can be reasoned that in the distinctive context of the humanitarian sector, which is characterized by an inherently high degree of uncertainty resulting from dynamic situations and intransparent contexts (Edwards

& Hulme, 1996), an introduction course is not sufficient to reduce newcomers' uncertainty and foster performance. Furthermore, given the normative nature of humanitarian work, employees' self-selection based on an affinity to MSF's organizational culture is likely to reduce potential effects of attending the socialization program on value congruence. Thus, the mechanisms predicted in standard socialization theories appear to be of only limited relevance in this context. Instead, MSF's socialization program seems to endorse newcomers' confidence in the relevance of the work and at the same time demonstrate that it is compatible with the realization of personal enjoyment. As such, it serves to reaffirm the normative and intrinsic motivation that is relevant in the context of humanitarian work.

The above resembles a socio-ideological approach to coordination, as outlined in paragraph 1.3. By directly and intensively shaping newcomers' experiences immediately upon entry, the socialization program encourages identification with the organization and instills a strong sense of the relevance of humanitarian work in newcomers, thereby motivating them to contribute to the normative goals or the cause of the organization.

### **1.6.3 Chapter 4: Which factors affect employee retention in MSF?**

The analysis of factors influencing retention revealed firstly, that staff turnover is high, with almost 60% of employees not returning for a second humanitarian mission. Secondly, employment opportunities and constraints that aid workers face appear to play a substantial role in influencing their decision to return. Particularly, the relative attractiveness of employment in the national labor market compared to employment in MSF, the extent to which professional constraints inhibit extended employment in the humanitarian field, and the problems involved in maintaining a partnership over long periods of absence appear to be relevant. In contrast, potential constraints experienced during a first humanitarian mission relating to stressors such as challenges of cultural adjustment and security threats, are less influential than anticipated. It appears that only in extreme circumstances when a premature termination of the mission is required, is the negative experience severe enough to affect reenlistment. However, limitations in the extent to which the available data in fact realistically represent the inquired factors need to be taken into consideration when appraising these findings. For example, the security situation was measured on the country level, irrespective of the fact that locations and regions within a country might differ substantially in terms of risk level. Nevertheless, important conclusions can be drawn.

Although the focus was on a specific type of retention (i.e. reenlistment), comparing these observations to findings generated in the for profit and public sector reveals that aid workers are actually quite similar to employees in other, less extreme fields, at least in terms of retention. Rather than being influenced by constraints experienced during a mission, aid workers primarily evaluate their job relative to available employment alternatives, then choose the most favorable option. Therefore, when aid workers have access to attractive occupational and national labor markets, the most favorable option is often found outside the humanitarian sector, thus inducing job exit.



These findings relate back to the challenge of external integration in terms of an organizations' resource base. While acquiring staff is not a problem – in fact, MSF's recruitment strategy can be highly selective because applicants exceed available positions – finding qualified staff for specific positions and having only 40% of employees return for a second mission is. Not surprisingly, staff retention is therefore identified as the most pressing challenge of human resource management in MSF.

#### **1.6.4 Chapter 5: Why and how does MSF remain legitimate despite acting controversially?**

The analysis of controversial organizational behavior and legitimacy in MSF showed that over its 40 year history, MSF has indeed repeatedly committed acts that caused controversy in the humanitarian field. Examples include the development of the concept of witnessing, the discouragement of donations earmarked for the tsunami response, the withdrawal during the Great Lakes crisis, and the rejection of sector-wide coordination efforts. These acts were characterized by the purposeful, proactive and public defiance of common operational standards and conventions of the humanitarian sector, thus constituting forms of *exceptional organizational behavior*.

In terms of enabling conditions, several factors were identified that establish MSF as a strong *actor organization* which possesses all the constitutive elements of organizations – identity, hierarchy, and rationality. First, a founding myth that emphasizes MSF's critical spirit, the presence of autonomy-conscious professionals, and a diversified financial resource base facilitate the foundation of its identity as a unique and independent organization. Second, a high degree of standardization of operational and organizational procedures reflects a strong hierarchy. Third, decision-making in MSF is characterized by a sequential logic that evaluates action alternatives in relation to organizational objectives, thus indicating a high degree of rationality. In combination, these factors facilitate organizational autonomy and independence, which in turn enables exceptionalism.

Finally, in terms of legitimation strategies, it could be demonstrated that MSF successfully applies impression management to portray its exceptional acts as legitimate. More specifically, MSF appeared to exploit the fact that there is no strict hierarchy of humanitarian goals and principles, nor definite standards of how to implement them. This openness or fragmentation allows originally controversial acts to be portrayed as either alternative means to realize common goals, or as resulting from a different prioritization of principles. In doing so, the ultimate goals and principles of the field are not violated and can still be referred to in order to establish legitimacy. This allows MSF to present itself as a reflective and critical actor, eager to examine and improve the standards of its field. As a result, MSF's controversial behavior no longer constitutes a threat to, but on the contrary, becomes a basis of its legitimacy.

In relation to the external challenge of legitimacy generation, this study showed how MSF succeeded in legitimating nonconformist organizational behavior by capitalizing on the

fragmentation of interpretations of humanitarian principles through the newly identified mechanism of *legitimacy by exceptionalism*.

## 1.7 Discussion and Conclusion

This dissertation comprises of four studies, originally written as independent articles, each of which highlights different aspects of MSF's approach to internal and external integration. In this introduction, the findings of these studies have been brought together as a basis to address the overarching question why and how MSF maintains its independence and sovereignty in a field characterized by increasing external control. This is not only a puzzling question for humanitarian organizations of which many experience autonomy loss, but also for organization scholars, since MSF operates in an environment in which strong external pressures for adjustment and conformity are expected to result in an opposite organization type, such as an *agent* or an *arena*. How is an organization then able to remain true to itself? The aim of this analysis is therefore to better understand the conditions and processes through which certain organizations become independent, empowered and sovereign actors (Hwang & Colyvas, 2011), or put differently, strong actor organizations (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). The in-depth study of MSF Holland as a particularly strong actor organization, facilitates the examination of how "strong social actorhood" is achieved in a sector where it can least be expected.

The following section presents the findings regarding the strong social actor argument as emerging from the synthesis of the four studies. Subsequently, the contributions and limitations the dissertation research in general and the studies conducted in its context are identified. The discussion of avenues for future research and a reflection on the insights of this research in relation to the accountability debate in the humanitarian sector concludes this introduction and synthesis chapter.

### 1.7.1 Strong social actorhood through internal and external integration

The four studies conducted in the frame of this dissertation indicate that strong social actorhood can be achieved through organizational activities that facilitate internal and external integration. Examining as diverse topics as governance, socialization, retention, and legitimacy generation, these studies highlight distinctive aspects of how MSF masters this dual challenge of integration. The first two studies show how the organization gears its activities towards internal integration through enhancing technocratic and socio-ideological control (Chapters 2 and 3). The latter two studies in turn illustrate the organization's activities to achieve external integration by means of establishing a large and diversified financial and human resource base in combination with strategies to enhance their legitimacy in the humanitarian sector (Chapters 4 and 5).

In combination, the four studies show how MSF throughout its history has developed the features of a strong social actor: a distinctive identity as well as a strong hierarchy and rationality. First, the organization's identity has been internally developed and externally enhanced by means of its exceptional behavior and associated legitimation strategies. In

addition, the organization has proven to be effective in confirming the motivation of its newcomers and aligning it to the organizational identity by means of its socialization course. Furthermore, through a diversification strategy the organization has managed to attain a strong and sound financial resource basis, whereas attempts to control dependencies on human resources seem less successful. Second, through formalization processes of HRM policies, deliberate attempts to professionalize its HRM department and respective staff, and standardization of operational work processes (such as in logistics), the organization has throughout the years established a strong hierarchy. Finally, the organization has managed to increase its rationality in the decision making about and implementation of its projects. All in all, MSF has thus managed to enhance its position in the sector, whereas many other humanitarian organizations experience increasing donor dependency and autonomy loss. Moreover, MSF managed to do this without compromising the sector's inherently moral and normative foundations, or, more specifically, the humanitarian cause.

### **1.7.2 Theoretical, methodological and sector-specific contributions**

In the four studies constituting this dissertation, diverse theoretical angles and multiple methods of data collection and analysis have been applied in order to examine MSF as an organization that succeeds in maintaining independence and sovereignty despite intensifying external pressures. In its entirety, this comprehensive and versatile approach provides three types of contributions: theoretical, methodological and practical. Those relating to the social actor argumentation are presented in the following, whereas detailed contributions of the distinctive studies are discussed in the respective chapters.

#### ***Theoretical contributions***

This dissertation provides an in-depth examination of how an organization can develop into a strong social actor in a domain not yet studied in this respect: the nonprofit sector. For this specific sector and case, the framework of strong social actor organizations as developed in the public sector proves to be of value.

In addition, a contribution to the actor approach is made by specifying a potential route towards strong social actorhood: by meeting challenges for internal and external integration, thereby distinguishing between technocratic and socio-ideological control versus the requirements for material and human resources and legitimacy. This refinement proves to be valuable since it points to crucial aspects in the process towards strong social actorhood: an organization's governance structure, its socialization of newcomers, and its attempts to acquire necessary resources and endorsement from its environment.

Finally, two new mechanisms are developed that provide alternative explanations of how internal and external integration and strong social actorhood can be achieved. First, in the socialization study (Chapter 3), goal framing theory is shown to provide a useful point of departure for developing a new mechanism of *motivation affirmation* to explain the effect of socialization, tailored to the normative orientation of employees in humanitarian, and generally, nonprofit organizations. Second, the concept of *organizational exceptionalism* and the

related mechanism of *legitimacy by exceptionalism* is developed and illustrated by means of the case study of MSF. This case illustration suggests the potential value of a new mechanism for legitimacy generation based on a distinct form of impression management, in addition to existing mechanisms of conformity to rationalized myths, or decoupling (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

### ***Methodological contributions***

The comprehensive research design of a revelatory case such as MSF, in combination with a multimethod approach, facilitates the generation of new and unusual insights into the management of humanitarian INGOs. The unique access granted by MSF Holland provides the opportunity to enhance the validity of findings by using various data collection methods as well as methods of analysis, thereby allowing approaching research questions from multiple angles.

This dissertation is one of the few case studies of a humanitarian organization or any other nonprofit organization that provides such detailed, comprehensive quantitative and qualitative analyses of the governance and management structure. In particular, the access to the organization's personnel database allows for an analysis of more objective determinants of turnover, an approach that has not yet been undertaken in the humanitarian sector. In addition, the qualitative research methods applied in this study generate worthwhile outcomes. For example, the socialization study (Chapter 3) resulted in a detailed coding scheme of performance evaluations that allows the investigation of effects of socialization, thereby introducing a new and useful method of data collection and analysis to the primarily survey based socialization literature.

### ***Contributions to the humanitarian sector***

From the perspective of the humanitarian practitioner, the research conducted provides some potentially useful insights into the management and functioning of humanitarian organizations. First, this study offers the first quantitative analysis of the determinants of retention in the humanitarian sector. To date, studies on turnover and retention in the humanitarian sector have been predominately explorative, relying on self-reported material or loosely based qualitative interviews and relatively small samples (e.g. Emmens & Parry, 2006; Loquercio et al., 2006). This study on the one hand corroborates the results of these qualitative endeavors but also adds new findings. For example, the results generated in the retention study (Chapter 4) suggest that aid workers might be more similar to employees from other employment sectors than often assumed, since they respond to standard employment opportunities and constraints. Furthermore, it is suggested that diversifying the workforce in terms of nationality and particularly fostering the recruitment of non-Western staff might be a feasible approach to enhance retention – in addition to the ethical benefits of reducing problematic “Western dominance”.

Second, the study on socialization effects (Chapter 3) illustrates the potential value of socialization programs for humanitarian organizations as a means to enhance employee motivation. This analysis also shows the limitations of such programs in terms of improving

performance, thus providing a basis to revise the content of socialization programs. Third, through the qualitative analysis of HRM policy making, detailed insight is provided into how one humanitarian organization navigates conflicting pressures for the professionalization of HRM systems. Finally, in combination, the four studies give an exemplary account into the way one prominent humanitarian organization has managed to maintain its independence and autonomy in an era in which humanitarian organizations are heavily pressured to subject to the demands of donors and meet more rigorous expectations within their environment.

### **1.7.3 Limitations and avenues for future research**

Despite its comprehensiveness and detail, this dissertation also has several limitations. Most importantly, it remains unclear yet whether the identified route towards strong social actorhood through internal and external integration, as well as its associated mechanisms, is applicable to other humanitarian INGOs or types of organizations generally. According to Dijkzeul's (2004) typology, the only humanitarian organization enjoying a level of independence similar to MSF is the Red Cross (ICRC). In fact, radical independence is a core component of its organizational identity and even more importantly, a basis of its legitimacy. As such, it is often addressed as a separate entity, distinctive from other humanitarian INGOs (see for example Clarke & Ramalingam, 2008). Thus, it might be another example of a humanitarian organization that is legitimate by being exceptional. However, it is commonly accepted, even by the governments who provide the majority of its funds, that the ICRC does not allow any interference in the implementation of its mandate (Dijkzeul, 2004). This indicates that in the particular case of the ICRC, independence is in fact an institutionalized expectation that does not require legitimation as exceptional behavior.

The dissertation research is based on an empirical analysis of a single case and does not include a comparison with other humanitarian INGOs, which limits the extent to which conclusions can be generalized. A similar analysis of the dual integration process in an organization that is less sovereign and independent would augment the reliability and reasoning concerning mechanisms and enabling factors for organizational actorhood. In addition, a comparative case study based on cases selected on the presence and absence of successful internal and external integration would generate the opportunity to explore whether meeting the challenge of integration is a necessary requirement for strong social actorhood.

Empirically, the research does not examine the effects of strong social actorhood and internal and external integration on the performance of MSF. Although implicitly assumed to be positively related, this is obviously a crucial relationship to further investigate: if strong social actorhood would not be associated with high performance, then the question arises whether strong social actorhood is a virtue or a vice. Hence, there might also be potentially damaging effects of strong social actorhood. Independent, autonomous organizations might run the risk of developing arrogance, developing blind spots and deafness to outside criticism. This could develop into "organizational autism" (Clarke, 2006). For example, MSF's lack of willingness to be coordinated or to subject to common standards might be

detrimental to the coordination, and therefore the quality, of humanitarian aid overall. Hence, even if in the ideal situation a strong social actor performs well, this does not automatically mean that this contributes to the sector's overall performance.

Theoretically, the dissertation leaves some questions unanswered. The focus is on how strong social actorhood can be achieved through meeting the challenges of internal and external integration. However, other potential routes to social actorhood might be conceivable, which are not developed here. In addition, one could imagine that the process is more cyclical than suggested in this study: once an organization becomes a strong(er) social actor, it can also enhance its potential to further integrate internally and externally. Hence, the relationship between strong social actor features and integration could become self-reinforcing. This leads to the question of what comes first: integration or the strong social actor? These thoughts deserve further theorizing and examination in future research.

#### **1.7.4 Further thoughts: This research and the accountability debate**

Finally, the findings of this dissertation highlight a puzzling aspect of the current system of humanitarian aid provision. In an effort to enhance humanitarian accountability, donors have become ever more involved in the design and implementation of relief projects to such an extent that, in some cases humanitarian INGOs actually compete for implementation of donor project proposals (Davis, 2007; Clarke & Ramalingam, 2008). This increased demand for accountability arose out of the criticism of humanitarian INGOs that they operated according to their own – according to donors: low – quality standards, thereby making recurrent mistakes and even causing harm to people in need. This was partly attributed to the fact that those hired for the job were “cowboys”, social misfits and thrill seekers, as opposed to qualified professionals. In addition, it was argued that the management of humanitarian organizations lacked professionalism. Hence, to some extent donors considered humanitarian INGOs as too independent and autonomous, yet without generating high quality aid.

As a result, the call for accountability increased, and humanitarian INGOs, rather than being strong social actors, in fact turned into *arenas* and *agents* that execute the agenda of their principals, i.e. the donors. The responsibility for actions thereby transfers to the donors as the executing organization has only limited control over its actions (Brunsson & Sahlín-Andersson, 2000). Thus, the increasing involvement and imposition of donor demands on humanitarian INGOs, which is intended to enhance accountability, in fact counteracts its basic aim as it prevents the implementing organization from taking responsibility for its actions. Only an actor who is able to choose and control its own actions can in fact be fully responsible for them (Brunsson, 1996). Following this reasoning, it could be questioned whether the very relevant and honorable call for more accountability in humanitarian aid provision could in fact be better implemented by supporting humanitarian INGOs to become actors and as such responsible for their actions, rather than trying to impose external standards and demands. However, if donors grant humanitarian organizations more autonomy, as they did in the past, then the question immediately also arises whether

increased autonomy will help prevent a return to a past of recurring mistakes, coordination failures and harm done to those who needed help.

This dilemma draws attention to a fundamental problem of the accountability debate in the humanitarian sector: the neglect of those affected by humanitarian aid. While made many times before, the claim can only be repeated – humanitarianism is a fundamentally altruistic aim and whether or not it is done “right” can only be appraised by those on the receiving end. This given, the dissertation does not aim to make any normative evaluations about “good” or “bad” managerial practices. Instead, the aim is to provide a comprehensive examination of one of the most high profile actors in the humanitarian field and its effort to establish control over members, operations, and crucial resources, while keeping external control through donors at minimum, and not the least, remain true to the humanitarian cause.

## **1.8 Outline of the Dissertation**

The dissertation research comprised of four studies dealing with diverse aspects of management in MSF. In the frame of this introduction, these studies have been brought together in order to examine how MSF succeeds in remaining independent and sovereign despite increasing external pressures for conformity. The theoretical heuristic foresaw that this ability was based on the successful mastering of a dual challenge of internal and external integration, which in turn enabled organizational actorhood. The empirical findings of the four studies illustrated how MSF approached this challenge and in effect emerged as a strong social actor organization. In the remainder of this dissertation, the four studies are presented. Originally written as independent and self-contained articles, a certain overlap and repetition, particularly regarding the methodological approach, is inevitable. I would like to ask the reader to kindly excuse such repetition.