

Working in the field

Before you apply to work in the field with MSF take time to reflect on the reasons for making this important decision.

Do you have romanticized notions of what this work entails? Or do you make an informed decision? You should be aware of issues MSF staff often faces when working and living in unfamiliar environments, under extremely difficult and stressful conditions.

This exercise is designed to help you assess your motivation, professional aspirations and emotional well-being. It is a space to think about yourself, your commitment to humanitarian aid in the types of contexts where MSF is present and about some of the constraints you may face while you are on mission.

Please consider the following information carefully before you submit your application.

Working in the field

You should be aware that MSF strives to provide access to healthcare for the most vulnerable populations, in countries where:

- **blatant human rights abuses may take place.**
- **homosexuality may be punishable by law.**
- **certain people, depending on their social, ethnic or tribal origin, may not enjoy rights commonly accepted and recognized in Western societies.**
- **rape may be used as a weapon of war.**
- **infectious diseases and epidemics are common.**
- **people may not have access to essential drugs.**

Security

To reach those who need our help the most, we often work in conflict and post-conflict regions. As an MSF field worker you will often find yourself in an insecure environment, where your life may be in danger.

Therefore, staff security is a top priority for MSF:

- Security briefings, plans, guidelines and protocols have been designed to manage risks and they may restrict your freedom of movement or your ability to interact with the local population outside of working hours.
- You may be under curfew and required to remain in the MSF compound.
- While in the field you will represent MSF 24 hours a day, seven days a week and you are expected to respect the security guidelines at all times.

Security

Consider these questions if you enjoy going out regularly or if you have difficulty being confined to the same place for long periods of time:

- **Have you experienced living in an unstable environment (meaning to be obliged to respect curfews, no-go-zones, a.o. restrictions)?**
- **Do you have difficulties being confined to the same place for a long period?**
- **Is the only reason you are considering field work to 'get out and about' and experience life in a new and different country?**
- **Do you have some hobbies or leisure activities that can be done within a confined space, where access to technology may also be limited?**

Living Conditions

Going overseas with MSF will require you to adjust to many unfamiliar living conditions. It will be a different lifestyle in which your privacy and leisure time may be reduced.

- No private bathroom, no possibility to practice your favorite sports for the duration of your mission.
- Locations with severe weather conditions (i.e. extreme heat or cold, high humidity and heavy rains or dry desert conditions)
- Living in a mud hut or a tent without fan or air conditioning, tolerating annoying insects and coping with limited electricity and poor choice of foods
- Live in a spacious house, enjoying some familiar luxuries (like cooking and cleaning staff) while the people you are assisting try to survive under the most basic conditions.

Living Conditions

Ask yourself how important comfort is to you before applying to work for MSF.

- Does living in a tent or a mud hut with thatched roof for a longer period sound like a fun challenge (or your worst nightmare)?
- Could you handle severe weather conditions as mentioned for a longer period?
- Can you tolerate lots of annoying insects?
- Can you cope with long-drop toilets? Does a bucket shower by candlelight (due to limited access to electricity) sound like another fun challenge?
- Can you eat rice and beans and beans and rice for months at a time? (slightly exaggerated but limited food variety can be common in the field)
- Can you adapt to having limited privacy, few opportunities for socializing and only sporadic internet access?

Stress

Humanitarian work in emergency contexts is highly stressful. A wide range of issues can cause stress and drain your motivation to work:

- High work load and long working days
- Strained relations with teammates or difficult relations with local authorities
- Health problems
- Lack of communication with your friends and relatives back home
- Frequent changes in the project, insecurity
- Poor living conditions and diet

Think about the way you handle stress in your daily life. Be honest with yourself. If you fear problems and seek to avoid them, then MSF is definitely not for you. Being part of a field team requires you to be in a problem-solving state of mind.

Stress

Consider the following:

- **Have you lived and worked in teams of three to ten people for extended periods?**
- **Are you a good communicator and facilitator?**
- **Can you put aside personal issues in order to complete your work?**
- **What causes you stress and how do you cope with it in a team environment?**
- **Are you resilient to challenging circumstances and situations? How do you know?**
- **Are you able to reflect on and adapt your behavior to manage a situation?**

Personal and family life

Going overseas means leaving your loved ones behind for long periods of time. Some people see humanitarian aid work as a way to heal or escape from difficult personal situations. This is never a good idea.

Give some thought to this. Leaving for a mission may be exciting, but returning from a field assignment during which you may have witnessed traumatic events can be quite difficult for you and your relatives.

- **Have you assessed the impact of putting your personal life in your home country 'on hold' for up to a year?**
- **Can you cope with keeping in touch on an infrequent and/or irregular basis, perhaps even just once every couple of months?**
- **Can your friends and family cope with that too?**

Personal and family life

It is very important to us to make a minimum package available to our volunteers during their mission, including a monthly salary and an insurance package.

However, MSF was founded as a volunteer organization and would like to remain that way. Therefore, MSF's salary might be relatively low compared to average salaries in your home country.

Whilst on mission, you might still be having to cope with expenses coming up in your home country.

- **Do you accept the benefits that MSF is able to provide?**
- **Have you considered the possible restrictions which might come with an MSF indemnity salary?**

Cross-culture

Being in a country where people have a very different understanding of issues like punctuality at work, responsible behavior or respect for personal space may lead to miscommunication and misunderstandings.

Although past experience in living and working in developing countries helps, it does not guarantee a successful placement with MSF. Tolerance is of utmost importance. Reflect on your capacity to live closely with, and show respect to, people with beliefs and cultures that differ from yours.

- **Have you ever lived within a culture that is totally different from the one you grew up in?**
- **Are you open to accepting there is more than one way of doing things, and that your way may not necessarily be 'right' in all contexts?**
- **Do you enjoy the challenge of communicating with those from different language and/or cultural backgrounds to your own?**

Summary

Read through the following questions:

- 1. Do you have a min. of two years professional experience in the related field of expertise?**
- 2. Are you prepared to work in a high risk security settings/conflict zones?**
- 3. Are you prepared to work in remote locations and under basic living conditions?**
- 4. Have you informed your family members and are they in favour of you joining MSF?**
- 5. Are you able to work and live in a team for extended periods of time?**
- 6. Do you have a good command of either English and/or French?**
- 7. Are you available for a minimum of 12 months? (exceptions for surgeons, anaesthetists, OT nurses: only 2-3 months required)**
- 8. Can you perform under pressure?**
- 9. Can you work with people from various nationalities/backgrounds?**

Can you answer all of them with a conscious YES?

Conclusion

The issues mentioned above are meant to be a reality check on what working in foreign environments sometimes entails. We hope that you have given them serious thought.

Thousands of people who have worked with MSF over the years have found their experiences in the field to be challenging and rewarding. For many, going on a mission has been a life-changing event. Working for MSF is about making a gesture rather than just seeking adventure or wanting a job. By becoming a field worker you are acting in solidarity with populations in need.

Your presence alongside these men, women and children in times of trouble sends a deeply meaningful message to them: "You have not been forgotten."