

'Who Can Sing the Song of MSF?': The Politics of 'Proximity' and Performing Humanitarianism in Eastern DRC

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Abstract

This article explores the everyday practice of security management and negotiations for access conducted by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in North Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Based on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and archival exploration, it examines the experience of MSF Congolese employees, who navigate a complex politics of humanitarian fixing and brokerage. Their role in MSF is simultaneously defined and circumscribed by their political and social situation. MSF's security management relies on local staff's interpersonal networks and on their ability to interpret and translate. However, local staff find themselves at risk, or perceived as a 'risk': exposed to external pressures and acts of violence, while possibilities for promotion are limited precisely because of their embeddedness. They face a tension between being politically and socially embedded and needing to perform MSF's principles in practice. As such, they embody the contradictions of MSF's approach in North Kivu: a simultaneous need for operational 'proximity', as well as performative distance from everyday conflict processes.

Keywords: humanitarianism, DRC, security, conflict, local staff

Introduction

One morning in Goma, I attended a meeting of the *Cercle de la Sécurité*: a group of Congolese humanitarians who work in security management for different international NGOs (non-governmental organisations) in the province. Although they hold a variety of different job titles, the members perform a common function within their respective organisations: they analyse local security conditions by collecting information about protracted violence and acts of criminality. They form and maintain a network among different local authorities and armed actors so that NGOs can negotiate access to operate in the fragmented and shifting political landscape. The members of the *Cercle* represent the backbone of humanitarian presence in North Kivu. As one of the founders put it, we are like 'fixers' as well as humanitarians, and this is our 'Congolese space of aid'. Although it does not feature in most official narratives, the ability of international humanitarian organisations to work in eastern DRC depends on this Congolese space of aid, which operates alongside the world of mobile foreign staff.

This article explores the complexities of the brokerage work conducted by Congolese MSF staff working in a 'field' that is not a distant, liminal space, but their country (and region) of origin. They have complicated and heterogeneous political and social histories, networks and perceived identities in the areas where MSF works. This 'proximity' is a double-edged sword: local staff are essential to networking with armed actors and political authorities, as well as translating the meanings of policies and principles into practice, yet they find themselves either at risk, or perceived as a risk, or both. They mediate ambiguous, overlapping social positions and competing demands and pressures in a context of cyclical violence. Because of their social and political embeddedness, they are perceived by their foreign colleagues as a potential risk to MSF's performance of neutrality and impartiality. Consequently, Congolese staff's position in MSF is circumscribed both to 'protect' them and to prevent any behaviour which might jeopardise the organisation's image. Instead, MSF's security praxis relies on a model of supposed 'complementarity': the presence of temporary foreign staff is seen as a counterweight to the embeddedness of locals. In short, 'proximity' both defines, and circumvents, local staff's role.

The article is based on eight months' ethnographic fieldwork in North Kivu – in the provincial capital Goma, and in Masisi. It draws from 180 interviews with present and former MSF fieldworkers with experience in North Kivu since 2005, in particular, fifty different Congolese employees with experience in Masisi, Rutshuru and Walikale. These interviews were conducted in North Kivu, Paris, London, and on Skype. The article also draws on MSF's internal archives, in particular, security guidelines and *Sitrep* reports. The article is structured in three parts. The first outlines MSF's work in North Kivu and the background literature. The second describes how local humanitarians' histories and personal networks as well as their present situations are central to understanding MSF's security management and access. The third describes the 'risks' of such embeddedness. The article concludes that Congolese staff embody the contradictions of MSF's approach in North Kivu: a simultaneous need for operational 'proximity' to, as well as performative distance from, everyday social and political dynamics.

Background

MSF in North Kivu

In North Kivu, international aid organisations installed themselves en masse after the influx of Rwandan refugees in 1994. The urban landscape of its capital, Goma, has been dramatically reshaped in consequence, while a range of NGOs have established projects in rural areas. The medical humanitarian organisation, MSF, has a long history in the region, having opened its first project in DRC in 1977. Today, three MSF sections work in the *Petit Nord*: France, Belgium and Holland, with their coordination offices based in Goma and Kinshasa. MSF is far from a homogenous movement: these different sections are autonomous and often have conflicting interpretations of MSF's principles and of appropriate action in practice. This article focuses on projects based in Masisi, Rutshuru and Walikale, from their inception in the early 2000s: the MSF sections support health facilities, respond to cyclical epidemics of measles, malaria, cholera and Ebola, treat wounded combatants and operate 'mobile clinics' to provide healthcare to rural areas.

North Kivu has been at the centre of violence in the DRC since the *L'Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo* (AFDL) invasion in 1996, during the second war between 1998 and 2003 when the province was controlled by the *Le Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD), the *Congrès national pour la défense du peuple* (CNDP) conflict from 2004 to 2009 when the zone was divided between different warring groups, and the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (M23) conflict which played out from 2012 to 2013. The province epitomises

Richards' (2005) 'no-peace-no-war', characterised by 'stable instability': cyclical violence with a 'militarized' everyday social environment (Verweijen, 2016). A shifting patchwork of over one hundred armed groups operates in eastern DRC – embedded in social and political networks which straddle both 'state' and 'non-state' spheres (Verweijen, 2016: 11).

MSF project sites are governed by an array of evolving networks: power is exercised through alliances between actors who 'partially stand in opposition and partially collaborate with the state' (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers, 2008: 50). Governance is not a static 'thing', but a negotiated *process* between politicians, customary authorities, ethnic associations, social movements, armed groups, churches, multinational corporations, the national army and international and national NGOs. These negotiation arenas are informal: 'embedded in social relations' (Hagmann and Péclard, 2010: 551). In order to operate, MSF needs to build up and maintain an extensive network to communicate with, and receive security reassurances from, relevant powerholders – a process of renegotiation on the terms of the organisation's presence.

'Proximity' is one of MSF's operational principles: 'proximity has been and remains a fundamental part of our security management', one security guideline for DRC summarises (MSF-OCB, 2018). 'Being there' to provide emergency healthcare is central to MSF's *raison d'être*. However, proximity is also important to ensure that MSF teams can analyse the context in order better to understand where MSF fits into the interests of different actors. In order to 'do security', MSF employees must analyse the political and social context by collecting information from a wide range of sources. As MSF France's former president summarised: 'The first line of protection is our own position, our understanding of the context, our ability to forge links' (MSF-OCP, 2002). MSF does not work in a 'space' purified from political interference; rather, MSF's presence is the product of 'negotiation, power-games and interest-seeking' (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010: 116). Security management is an inherently social and political process (Neuman and Weissman, 2016), which involves people and their interactions – perceptions, relationships and *interpretations* of the context and abstract symbolic principles, as well as shared interests with governing authorities (Magone *et al.*, 2011: 2). In sum, being well-connected is an essential part of MSF's everyday practice. As one head of mission told me: 'Networking is key to my job description. My job is to enable the doctors to do theirs.'

The Other 92%

This article shifts the focus onto everyday practice because aid interventions are 'socially constructed and negotiated processes', transformed by actors and their

interactions (Long and Long, 1992: 35). Too often, ‘Aidland’ is seen as an exclusionary ‘bubble of northern-based’ expatriates (Harrison, 2013), overlooking the significance of locally based aid workers who are intricately interwoven with local politics. Local staff must balance their embeddedness ‘in the field’ with their professional position (Redfield, 2012; Crombé and Kruper, 2019), while institutional structures often reproduce inequalities between ‘national’ and ‘international’ staff, thereby reflecting broader structures of (post)colonial global inequity (Fassin, 2007; Geissler, 2013). In MSF, ‘national staff’ – employees who are recruited within their country of origin rather than flown in for short-term ‘missions’ – account for 92% of employees ‘in the field’ (Fox, 2014: 106). If MSF is a dispersed collection of individuals, Congolese employees are MSF’s permanent human infrastructure in North Kivu: drivers, guards, logisticians, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, technicians. Senior decision-making positions (such as heads of mission and project coordinators) are held by foreign staff, who since 2013 have been ‘partnered’ with a Congolese ‘assistant’, a guide relied upon for ‘local’ knowledge.

The ‘relational and interpretive’ labour of local aid workers often remains overlooked, or ‘invisible’, in aid implementation (Peters, 2020). But the everyday processes of brokerage and translation (Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Bierschenk *et al.*, 2000) conducted by local staff are central to understanding humanitarian operations in conflict. To make sense of these dynamics, I draw upon the literature on intermediaries and brokers: missionaries, colonial regimes, explorers, as well as researchers, journalists and NGOs, have all depended on local employees to network and adapt pre-designed policies to specific contexts (Kennedy, 2013; Lawrence *et al.*, 2006). The defining feature of brokers is that they straddle and connect social worlds, often in zones where multiple forms of political authority coexist. They construct strategic identity positions (James, 2011), and their position is ambiguous: they negotiate their legitimacy over time, with competing pressures and expectations. They broker relationships between different actors, drawing on personal networks, and conduct translation – complex processes of negotiating shared meanings. While some authors highlight the advantageous position of such individuals, others emphasise the risks of being ‘in-between’. This article illustrates how Congolese humanitarians are simultaneously empowered and exposed.

Brokerage and Translation

Security Brokers

First, Congolese MSF staff used their own personal contacts to access information and network for

MSF: having a network is central to their humanitarian practice. As one MSF security plan for Congo summarises, ‘networking and context analysis is the basis of our capacity to negotiate acceptance’ and ‘national staff have a key role in this’ (MSF-OCB, 2018). ‘Assistants’, for example, maintain a network and introduce rotating foreigners to local actors. Jean was a former project coordinator assistant in North Kivu. ‘To be connected is my job,’ he explained, because internationals ‘lack informants, they live in an expatriate ghetto.’ Jean would ‘find out who the project coordinator needs to know, find a way to contact and introduce them.’ One head of mission assistant described his daily work as ‘treading water’, analysing the evolving context and sorting through a ‘casserole’ of information and rumours. In his words: ‘I am the institutional memory – the branch, where birds [expatriates] land for support, before flying off again.’ It is not only assistants who network: security is ‘the job of everyone’ (MSF-OCP, 2007). All staff are encouraged to share any information that may be pertinent for MSF’s operations and are expected to network as part of their role. In short, they ‘do security’ on the side.

To accomplish this, local staff draw from their diverse experience and backgrounds. Some have friends and family in political networks or have political histories themselves – experience in the political wings of armed groups or local government. Others have military pasts: thousands of Congolese youth have been going in and out of armed groups for several decades. NGOs and armed groups are key employers in the region: some humanitarians have histories in rebel groups, some rebels have histories as humanitarians. In addition, it is striking how many MSF employees are linked to customary structures. This was commented upon by one experienced Congolese employee, who contrasted his own modest origins: ‘No royal blood here!’ Other employees brought extensive contacts from their past experience of brokering uncertainty in the Kivus – as *négociants* in the mining sector (Vogel and Musamba, 2017), employees in the government health structure, or long-distance drivers and traders. To take one example, Bahati joined MSF as a guard in Rutshuru. During his introductory briefing, he learnt that ‘security also meant information’. Bahati had an advantage: he had family and friends in local armed groups and the national army who shared information with him. Not only this, but Bahati had been part of the AFDL rebel movement and had contacts from his military past among the armed group in control of MSF’s project site.

Translation

Congolese staff also translate linguistically between foreign staff who do not speak Swahili or local dialects,

and armed actors who do not speak French. Yet, this process is more complex than linguistic translation. Congolese employees described a second, simultaneous conversation which internationals could not understand, and acted as a form of 'aside'. Richard, a former project coordinator assistant, described his role as 'reassuring': he guided his international colleagues, while trying to 'build trust' with armed commanders by responding to questions such as 'what does this *muzungu* really want?'. These interactions relied on a balance between performed 'local-ness' through language (Peters, 2016), and the perceived remoteness of unknown foreigners. In one meeting, for instance, a rebel commander told Richard that he had confidence Richard was telling the truth about MSF's intentions, as Richard was unable to escape the repercussions of lying. Yet, this commander would only share sensitive information with the 'expat', who did not have links locally. Translation was also strategic: staff described adjusting meaning in these 'asides'. As Jean explained, it was impossible to 'translate tone, exact meaning', and at times, it was not necessarily desirable: 'I didn't want to translate exactly how they [expats] said it: it would cause tensions or didn't make much sense.'

Congolese staff, therefore, also helped negotiate the meanings that MSF's policies and principles acquired in practice (Mosse, 2005). They reproduced an institutional binary of 'local' and 'non-local', which justified their own position as mediating between the two, making 'local culture' intelligible to 'internationals', and MSF's interventions intelligible locally in order to facilitate 'acceptance'. Congolese staff described themselves as 'cultural guides' for foreigners, helping to ensure that 'expatriates' 'behave accordingly in order to have a good acceptance and image of MSF' (MSF-OCA, 2014b). In cultural briefings given to newly arrived foreign staff, one head of mission assistant covered a range of topics: 'don't wear flip-flops to meetings with political authorities, they are for the toilet', and 'don't ask too many questions of armed groups, it creates suspicion'. He saw himself as a cultural '*réfèrent*': MSF 'needs to be adapted, we are here to help.' A former project coordinator described local staff as 'cultural bridges that help us avoid dangerous *faux pas*.'

In addition, local staff described 'translating principles' – abstract concepts of neutrality, impartiality and independence – so that they gained meaning in practice. One experienced employee, for instance, argued that the biggest mistake any foreign colleague can make is assuming that MSF's message will work in Congo as it might in other places: 'some expatriates just start talking MSF as if they were in France.' MSF's 'perception study' concluded that the translation of principles in line with cultural specificity was important for the organisation's security (Abu-Sada, 2012). Local staff are seen to play an essential role. In one MSF project in Masisi, for instance,

the *promo santé* team travelled to rural areas to raise awareness (*sensibiliser*) about MSF's medical services, and to communicate MSF's values, using 'strategies', such as theatre or workshops. One Congolese health promoter, Prudence, described the team as 'intermediaries' who 'help pass MSF's message' and prevent 'misperceptions' to help 'security'. In Prudence's words, she learnt to 'speak humanitarianism' and translate it to others.

Congolese staff also help interpret or 'read' (Pottier, 2006) the security context: 'after all, they live it,' one head of mission summarised. Jean, the former project coordinator assistant, explained: 'We are guides. We analyse and help them [expatriates] understand, we see things they don't.' Security is an everyday experience with detectable locally determined signifiers – different staff members drew on diverse past experiences in order to read them. Many possessed a form of situated *savoir faire* about how to navigate a particular context, gained through experience. For instance, drivers play a central role. As MSF France's former President, Jean-Hervé Bradol, explained: the driver is an 'ambassador ... who mediates with local powerholders and with the population' (MSF-OCP, 2003). In North Kivu, they were described as MSF's *porte-parole*: well-connected, skilled in navigating roadblocks, and the 'first line of contact' in case of an aggression on the road (MSF-OCA, 2014b). In Masisi, one driver described his job as 'reading the road'. During mobile clinics and health promotion trips, while 'nurses and doctors do their work', he described the driver's role as talking to people, collecting information and 'taking the temperature'.

Performing Principles

Finally, the proximity of some staff became a means of illustrating MSF's impartiality in practice. As well as interpersonal networks, local staff possessed perceived collective and personal identities which held a collection of meanings and associations. Some staff were known quantities locally, with family ties or political histories. Others had fluid and overlapping, 'ethnic' and regional identity markers which mapped onto highly politicised and historically formed discourses of belonging (Mathys, 2017). As Pottier (2006: 151) describes, humanitarians could not 'shed their ethnic identities: instead they accept that a perceived ethnic identity brings strategic advantages, as well as disadvantages'. In short, local staff had meaningful perceived identities, and in times of tension, advised their colleagues on how to take these identities into account for the organisation's advantage – another micro-practice of translation.

Luc, one experienced humanitarian, employed the following analogy: MSF already has the 'lyrics' – the

humanitarian principles and the discourse. But Luc helps choose ‘who is going to sing the song’, the most appropriate person to ‘communicate MSF’s message’. In other words, who can best perform a humanitarian role in that context? The most common example was ‘balancing’ convoys: Congolese staff highlighted the importance of mixed and representative MSF teams as a way of rendering impartiality visible, especially when crossing frontlines, roadblocks or travelling through areas controlled by different armed actors (Pottier, 2006). As one driver explained, the humanitarian status of local staff was often questioned at roadblocks: but, ‘when they see one of their brothers with us’ – someone known or trusted – ‘they think ok, it’s *un des nôtres*’ [one of ours]. In sum, the political and social embeddedness of ‘locals’ was understood as an advantage, and central to enabling MSF to navigate project sites in the province.

‘At Risk or a Risk’

However, as one French logistician summarised, there was a perception among MSF ‘expatriates’ that ‘local staff’s proximity means they are at risk themselves, or a potential risk to MSF.’ The very embeddedness that was described as a resource was also seen as a potential source of risk in MSF: Congolese staff do not occupy senior decision-making roles in their own country, I was told, both in order to ‘protect’ them, and to prevent any behaviour which might jeopardise MSF’s image. Alongside operational proximity, MSF’s approach relies on the *performance* of humanitarian principles (Givoni, 2016). After high-profile security incidents in the early 2000s, MSF decided ‘to find out how it is perceived in the places where it works’: better communication of MSF’s values, work and principles became understood as central to security (Abu-Sada, 2012:11). After much debate and conflicting interpretations, neutrality remains a core principle in the MSF movement. Despite the limited evidence that principles necessarily protect humanitarians (Neuman and Weissman, 2016), perception and security are nonetheless understood as interlinked in North Kivu. As one MSF security plan explains, ‘the perception of MSF behaviour ... is crucial. Our movements, attitudes, words, speeches, conversations are watched, analysed and interpreted, according to different groups’ opinions and positions’ (MSF-OCA, 2009). Principles such as neutrality don’t exist in and of themselves: they need to be interpreted, translated and actively performed. One security guideline for DRC explains: ‘Even if MSF principles are properly respected in the field according to our own standard, they also need to be perceived as such by the population and actors that are able to inflict harm on our staff and patients.’ In short, MSF ‘needs to proactively communicate’ its principles through staff’s everyday behaviour (MSF-OCB, 2018).

In this way, MSF is what its employees do in its name: employees *are* the organisation, its human embodiment. It is only through the behaviour of fieldworkers that principles gain meaning. Consequently, MSF staff are ‘on duty’ at all times. As several MSF codes of conduct for expatriates explain, ‘all actions and statements made by staff are seen by outsiders as representing MSF. All staff members should act in accordance with the humanitarian principles ... during and outside work hours’ (MSF-OCA, 2006). For MSF staff then, there risks being a tension between the personal and the professional spheres. If all social interaction is performative, we all play multiple and overlapping roles, and few follow the same social script at work as when they are with their friends (Goffman, 1978). In MSF however, this is particularly exaggerated: MSF imagines volunteers to be ‘unencumbered by social obligations at home’, similarly acquiring ‘few in the field’ (Redfield, 2012: 362). For many Congolese staff, this is a particularly complex endeavour: some are members of the communities in which they live and work, embedded in political and social networks. As one nurse asked me: ‘But where is the field for me? This is my home.’ Nonetheless, local staff too are supposed to adopt MSF’s ‘values’ even outside work hours ‘to act as ambassadors towards the community’ (MSF-OCB, 2018). As one project coordinator assistant summarised, ‘we are MSF, but at the same time, we have our own stories. Sometimes, it can be difficult to balance the two.’

At Risk

Congolese staff from diverse backgrounds were unanimous: they felt more exposed than their foreign colleagues – subjected to pressure and coercion from local armed actors during negotiations. One experienced employee argued that armed actors do not ‘buy into’ the humanitarian principles coming from ‘a local’, but make demands that they would not make of foreigners: for phone credit, contributions at checkpoints, to hire certain personnel or purchase from certain suppliers, to pay additional fees, or to give equipment and set up systems of fraud. While networking, local staff found themselves in a precarious position with a set of complex, competing expectations and demands. For example, Moise worked in his hometown in Masisi territory, and described the difficulty of presenting himself as a representative of MSF. He had multiple family and friend links to local armed networks, and faced mounting pressure: ‘Armed groups ask you for things, find out about you, your origin, family. They exploit any personal links between you and them. You are exposed.’

Theoretically, the MSF emblem is supposed to become employees’ new ‘identity marker’ (Hilhorst and Schmiemann, 2002): the organisation is performed

through an ‘assemblage’ of the white cars, flags, and people in MSF T-shirts (Latour, 2005). Yet, not everyone can perform this humanitarian identity with the same ease. For some local staff, their situation in society and their military, political and personal histories often made it difficult for them to be viewed as mere representatives of MSF. Employees with military histories described the difficulty of presenting themselves as impartial to the conflict: for instance, individuals with experience in Rwandan-backed rebellions endeavoured to keep their background a secret from ‘self-defence’ Mai-Mai who mobilised against these rebellions. Others described an increasing ‘ethnicisation’ of armed networks in the region. Jean, the former project coordinator assistant, summarised: ‘MSF itself is accepted, but it’s more difficult to get them [armed actors] to accept MSF staff from other groups.’ The problem, Jean explained, was that these staff were viewed as ‘implicated’ in historical violence.

A Risk

As well as facing additional risks, local staff were seen by foreign MSF employees to constitute a potential risk: there was a concern that their behaviour might jeopardise MSF’s organisational image, and thus security. Ultimately, many foreign MSF staff seemed to doubt whether their local colleagues could be neutral and impartial, or perceived as such by armed actors. Because Congolese staff were subject to increased pressures, there were concerns that they might be forced to make unacceptable compromises. In other words, among foreign staff in MSF, there remained some doubt about locals’ commitment to so-called ‘MSF spirit’ which transcended ‘particularist ties and affiliations’ (Shevchenko and Fox, 2008: 116). There were concerns among senior management about systems of fraud which occurred without ‘expat supervision’: fuel or mechanic parts being sold on the side, or irregularities in pharmacy stocks. In other cases, foreign staff were concerned that ‘ethnic alliances’ would be prioritised over the ‘MSF behaviour’. After tensions within the team and the discovery of a system of fraud in one project, the ‘expat’ team concluded that the national team ‘know the principles very well, but prioritise their own benefit (power, position, money) and their ethnicity over MSF’: they are ‘embedded in society’ (MSF-OCA, 2014a).

The interpersonal networks of local staff were useful, but viewed with some distrust by MSF ‘expats’. In response to accusations of Congolese staff being sympathetic or allied with certain armed groups, one employee concluded: ‘We don’t know what our staff do in their free time.’ Several foreign MSF staff described their unease at never knowing the extent of the links between their local colleagues and armed actors. One former head of mission remembered how during one

meeting, ‘the first thing the leader of the CNDP did was to ask our local colleague about his father – there were family connections, I had no idea.’ Some Congolese staff admitted that they had not disclosed their military background to their colleagues: although many foreigners have military histories, Congolese staff argued that their own military experience was viewed with suspicion.

This distrust was aggravated by instances when foreign MSF staff felt that the organisation’s neutrality had been ‘compromised’ by local staff. I was told about cases of local staff socialising publicly with armed actors, or using MSF equipment for the administrative tasks of armed groups – ‘some willingly, but most out of survival,’ one project coordinator remembered. In a few extreme cases, staff were discovered to have concurrent military affiliations: joining active combat, or spotted in military uniform (MSF-OCP, 2012). Humanitarians had military pasts, and some returned to their politico-military careers. At one project, the new Administrator of the Territory appointed by the M23 rebel administration was a former MSF employee: ‘I knew him well, we had to reset boundaries,’ the project coordinator remembered. In other cases, the personal lives of local staff became seen as a security risk. After the relationship between an employee and a woman from a well-connected family had soured, one MSF team received threats and were forced to withdraw. During *sensibilisation* sessions, it was emphasised to local staff that ‘their behaviour will also detriment the image/security of MSF ... being seen as too close/in favour/connected to specific groups can be a potential risk’ (MSF-OCA, 2011): they were ‘MSF 24/7 – not only during work hours’ (MSF-OCA, 2014a).

In this way, Congolese staff were also approached in MSF as a potential *source* of insecurity: a group with different interests, links, alliances that needed to be analysed and ‘managed’ in order to avoid ‘security incidents’. Their perceptions, too, were considered important for security (Abu-Sada, 2012). As one former head of mission put it, ‘most of the security problems came from within: issues of staff management and accusations of partiality.’ Balanced recruitment, for instance, was considered essential in MSF teams. The security guidelines stated that ‘proximity among our national staff’ is ‘fundamental’ but ‘needs to be balanced’, to avoid tensions becoming a potential threat (MSF-OCB, 2018). One Congolese MSF nurse told me that local staff ‘may betray *la maison*’ by sharing information with bandits if they perceived MSF to be partial, they felt personally wronged, or for their own personal interest. In the face of robberies targeting MSF’s vehicles, there was suspicion of internal collaboration within MSF teams – ‘an internal leak’ about the convoy’s exact itinerary.

Imperial Duress: The Functions of Detachment

Such concerns acted to emphasise the importance of foreign staff: MSF considers ‘complementarity’ between foreign and local employees as central to maintaining its presence. Jean, the former project coordinator assistant, argued that expatriates and Congolese ‘keep one another mutually safe: we do things together, like a couple who complement each other’s weaknesses.’ Just as ‘local-ness’ is understood to hold functions in MSF, so does ‘foreignness’ (Redfield, 2012). As one head of mission explained, ‘being out of the context is a resource, we are less exposed, we can go home if things go wrong.’ Foreign staff in North Kivu saw their role as ‘diffusing tensions’ because they do not face the same pressures or risks as their local colleagues. Some Congolese staff similarly described their foreign colleagues as a form of protection. In the words of one driver, foreigners ‘bolster our humanitarian identity, locals are mixed up in their own disagreements, personal things.’ Luc, an experienced employee, described a ‘*parapluie* (umbrella) strategy’, whereby Congolese staff use expatriates, in particular ‘white expatriates who are visibly foreign’, to ‘cover’ themselves from demands of armed interlocutors. One head of mission assistant concluded that, even if MSF asked him to become Head of Mission in North Kivu, he would refuse: ‘Head of Mission abroad, as an expatriate? Of course! But here? No thank you, that would be impossible.’

Second, in MSF’s security frameworks foreign staff are seen as central ‘to safeguard impartiality in conflict settings’ (Hofman and Heller Pérache, 2014: 1178). Being foreign is described within MSF as central to decision-making: international staff ‘have the benefit of an external point of reference that hasn’t already been appropriated by the local political landscape’ (*ibid.*). In other words, in MSF, foreign-ness is described as central to any construction of impartiality and neutrality: foreign staff are tasked with preventing any behaviour that might jeopardise MSF’s image or working relationships. Although Congolese staff are crucial, their interpretations are seen as partial. Expatriate-only meetings discuss sensitive information, and the potential power of local staff’s role is minimised: ‘expats’ lead negotiations with armed groups in an official capacity. ‘National staff guide you, but in a certain direction, so you need to diversify your sources and do your own analysis,’ one former head of mission summarised. Instead, local staff’s role is to ‘help collect information, but not take the decision,’ another project coordinator explained, because they could not ‘give an analysis that isn’t influenced by who they are.’ MSF endeavoured to prevent local employees becoming powerful interfaces between the organisation and external actors, and

Congolese staff were not often in senior positions in their own country. Instead, the way to progress in MSF was to be expatriated abroad: ‘there, they can be neutral,’ one former head of mission claimed.

Structural elements of international humanitarianism which are usually identified as weaknesses, such as thematic rather than contextual knowledge among ‘expats’, or hypermobility, are in fact seen to hold functions within MSF: helping to preserve a degree of (perceived) detachment of foreign staff from the complexities of everyday politics in the site of intervention. Senior managers of North Kivu projects explained that there are time-limits on ‘missions’ to prevent expatriates becoming ‘too implicated’ at a local level. In effect, it is imperative that foreigners do not ‘go native’. Personal relationships are understood through a security logic in MSF: although networking is crucial to their job, foreign staff must not become too socially entangled – this includes with local staff, with whom sexual relations are often forbidden in rural projects, apparently in part to avoid tensions or perceptions of partiality within the team, as well as ‘perception problems’ locally. In other words, foreign MSF staff must balance proximity and distance, engagement and containment. They must work with everyone, but be seen as close to no one in particular. Their ‘proximity’ to ‘the local’ must be ‘balanced’ – not tilting the perceived position of the organisation as a whole, or their own perceived alliances as individuals.

Ann Stoler (2016: 28) emphasises the need to explore the ‘messy, troubled spaces of ambiguous colonial lineages’, whereby the ‘configurations are different, as are the actors’, with a ‘displacement of certain elements and conversation of others’. In this case, the aims and actors have changed, but they still involve the maintenance of distance between foreign interveners and local populations. While colonial regimes ‘cordoned itself off from the native world’ (Stoler, 1995: 112) based on notions of racial purity, MSF tries to preserve the supposed detachment of foreign fieldworkers, who must not become ‘polluted’ by personal proximity to local political networks. Imperial duress lingers in the perceived dangers that ‘proximity’ presents to ‘neutrality’, and the description of ‘locals’ as open to corruption or tied up in particularistic loyalties. This reactivates colonial discourses of Otherness that portray ‘the rest’ as bound up in particular attachments, while universal values are ‘encompassed by the Westerner’ (Mudimbe, 1988: 46). Local staff are essential to the everyday work of MSF, but remain seen as part of the ‘native world’.

Conclusion

The everyday practices of brokerage and translation conducted by locally hired employees are crucial to how

humanitarian organisations work in fragmented and militarised political landscapes. Congolese staff are essential to understanding MSF's security management in North Kivu. The region has become the base of long-term international presence: researchers, journalists, peacekeepers, NGOs as well as multinational corporations need to manage uncertainty to work. In this context, the ability to network, analyse and translate has become an important skillset: the 'fixing' sector is on the rise. Rather than distinct 'bubbles', the worlds of 'humanitarians', 'politics' and 'armed groups' are overlapping and interlinked – individuals do not just broker relationships between these groups, but also move between them.

Congolese humanitarians mediate a complex position in North Kivu. They are brokers and translators, as well as technicians. On the one hand, the ability to network, translate and guide gave some employees considerable importance in daily humanitarian operations: there were advantages to situating oneself as 'local' (Peters, 2016). On the other hand, these humanitarians encountered risks, balancing competing and contradictory demands. Their position is further complicated by the importance placed on performing principles in MSF: they face distrust precisely because of the social and political histories, situation, and networks that are central to their security practices. Humanitarianism is built on the idea of universal humanity, overlooking the fact that not everyone can perform neutrality with the same ease – to armed actors, or to their own humanitarian colleagues. Not everyone can 'sing the song'.

Ultimately, Congolese staff embody the contradictions of MSF's approach in DRC: a simultaneous need for operational 'proximity', as well as performative distance from the politics of everyday life. MSF's approach combines a simultaneous 'engagement' with, as well as both 'containment' from (Enria, 2019: 5), everyday social and political networks. Although the embeddedness of local staff is central to MSF's work, the organisation counterbalances it with the supposed distance of foreign staff, who are understood to help protect their colleagues and 'safeguard' MSF's neutrality and impartiality. Effectively, the security model is based on a discourse of complementarity between 'international' and 'national' staff as part of an assemblage to perform humanitarianism.

This model may be built on notions of complementarity, but it is not an egalitarian practice. It helps to maintain the racialised hierarchy between foreign decision-makers, and their 'native' assistants. The inequality between 'national' and 'expatriate' staff has been an ongoing topic of discussion within MSF (Fox, 2014). In 2006, the MSF sections signed the *La Mancha* accords, which aimed to 'provide fair employment opportunities for all staff' and 'address any issues of

discrimination within MSF'.¹ Despite this, MSF has still not overcome the 'divide between travelling expatriates and the much larger pool of work circulating through a local job market' (Redfield, 2012: 375). Instead of the largescale promotion of staff in their own country, MSF has focused on improving opportunities for national staff to *become* expatriates. MSF remains sceptical of the agenda to 'localise' top positions because in volatile areas where it considers its work the most relevant, the symbolic detachment of foreigners is understood to protect local employees, and to safeguard the organisation's (real or perceived) impartiality, neutrality and independence (Schenkenberg, 2016). The structure remains largely unchanged because 'foreign-ness' is seen in MSF to hold such important operational functions. Not everyone is trusted to sing the song of neutrality.

As a result, proximity continues to define, and limit, many humanitarians' roles. In our final meeting, the former employee from Rutshuru, Bahati, concluded that his 'links' were an asset, but meant that he 'couldn't evolve' in MSF. Bahati's experience encapsulates what could be termed a 'security curse' – his role was fixed to a certain locality, he was useful where he was. It was thematic specialisation that led to promotion or 'expatriation' with MSF, but Bahati was not offered the opportunity to develop his technical skills. He was under the impression that this was because he was distrusted by his foreign colleagues: 'I think they [expatriates] knew I was useful here, but saw me as too implicated in politics.' In the end, Bahati left MSF and now works for another NGO.

Note

1 Available at <http://associativehistory.msf.org/la-mancha-agreement>

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