



engineers without borders  
ingénieurs sans frontières

## **James Orbinski, January 2003**

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I just would like to say that I'm absolutely delighted and thoroughly honoured to be asked to speak here tonight at your second conference. And I would like to say quite honestly that when I think about the potential of Engineers Without Borders I am nearly exploding with enthusiasm for what you may accomplish with this incredible project. From Medecins sans frontieres or Doctors Without Borders one could argue EWB using the name "Without Borders" or "sans frontiers" is in fact a nice form of imitation. In fact could be seen as the highest form of flattery. Doctors Without Borders and Engineers Without Borders in fact are not the same. Doctors as many of you will know are known to be a serious and sober group. While engineers are known to be let's just say brash and not necessarily always sober. For Engineers Without Borders you have clearly taken off since the year 2000. You have at least 12 very dynamic and very creative projects in 12 different countries around the world. Your organization has grown from Victoria to St John's and there are 21 different chapters across Canada.

Now why such rapid growth? Well, I think Dr Johnston touched on the key issue. It's the power of great ideas and it's the power of clearly articulated principles. Ideas are more powerful than armies and ideas are more powerful than nations. They can shape and reshape the very fabric of a society; they can shape and reshape the very fabric of an integrating global society. They can inspire people each and every individual person who hears such principled ideas. They can inspire people to aspire to a better world. The vision of Engineers Without Borders is one such set of great and principled ideas. And the future for Engineers Without Borders, I think, is in fact a very very positive future.

Now I've been asked tonight to share some of my personal experience and some of the experience of Medecins sans frontieres over its last 33 years and to offer some critical comment if you will on Engineers Without Borders and particularly some critical comment as it pertains to this early nascent germinal phase of the organization. So that Engineers Without Borders can "get it right," and make sure that its structure and function have a clear and firm direction. Well I'm sorry to disappoint, there are in fact no magic formulas, no magic algorithms, no magic technical solutions to getting it right.

MSF's history is a history over 35 years where the organization has struggled every single day to get it right. It struggles operationally, organizationally, every single day to get it right. Now the key issue for MSF and I think the key issue for Engineers Without Borders in getting it right is not seeking the right answers but in fact defining the right questions. The questions that you ask about who you are and where you are going, the questions that you ask matter and they matter enormously. Well what are those questions for MSF and what potentially could those questions be for Engineers Without Borders? Well if I could be so bold and brash as to some how capture and encapsulate the 33 years of Medecins sans frontieres into questions, I would say there are

three questions. The first is, what is our vision? The second is, what is our action? The third is, what is our voice?

Now underlining these three questions of vision, action and voice are two and perhaps arguably more, though two critically important issues. And the first issue is independence. Is the organization independent? The second critical issue underlining these three questions of vision, action and voice is the question or the issue of culture. What is the culture of the organization? Not the organization of the organization but the culture of the organization. What does it feel like to live in this organization? Am I a member of the living, breathing, palpable organization that has clearly articulated principles; that has a clearly articulated vision; that has a clearly articulated action; that has a clearly articulated voice; and that has a place for me and where I feel I am part of that articulation? Now those are in my mind the issues that MSF has struggled with every single day of its history and struggles with today and will continue to struggle with in the future if it is going to continue to be a successful organization.

Now let me take each of these issues and explore them generally in terms of MSF's experience and in terms of my own personal experience. Now from its beginning 33 years ago MSF has struggled to both provide and demand respect for people's right to humanitarian assistance and their right to humanitarian protection. No we do this in war, we do this in natural disasters and we do this in situations where people are politically neglected or excluded. And for those who live the work of MSF, this is a practical action that is by definition fraught with apparent paradox, with dilemmas and with uncertainty. It is a place where the right questions matter and sometimes where posing the right question is better than pursuing the wrong answer. We work firstly and foremostly with people whom must suffer the failings if you will of human systems, whether those systems be health systems, political systems or systems that are so called other as seeing fellow human beings as something than less that they actually are. Now indeed we only know too well that there are often no right answers. But often more so obviously wrong answers, wrong actions and wrong postures that acquiesce to the apparent utility if you will of reality or to the way the world is. And our action, the action of MSF is an action that is taken by choice and is a choice that is possible. Only because we know, we intuit, we have a vision of what should be and because we are able to find the courage to demand respect for what can be.

Now concretely for MSF, humanitarian action is in our the therapeutic feeding center in Ethiopia, it's in the Congo with women and girls who are victims of rape as a weapon of war. It's in Sierra-Leone in our surgical and rehabilitation units for people who have had their hands and their feet cut off in war in order to force their political submission. It's in Angola where people starve and suffer while their government tries to create the illusion that all is normal. It's in Cambodia and Guatemala where sex workers and street children who are pulverized with poverty. It's with refugees and displaced persons in Timor, in Belgium, in Afghanistan, in Italy, in France and in over 4 hundred projects in 80 different countries around the world. And it's in our recently launched (3 years ago) access to essential medicines campaign, where along with many other non-governmental organizations we're fighting to overcome access barriers to essential lifesaving medicines - barriers that are created by market failure and by both public

policy failure. Now the access to essential medicines campaign means tackling issues like the Trips Agreement, the Trade and Intellectual Property Rights Agreement and its impact on people's access to lifesaving medicines. For MSF, these are the actions that the organization engages itself in today.

And what is the vision if you will of MSF? Well for Medecins sans frontieres humanitarian actions seeks firstly and always to relieve suffering. It then seeks to restore people's autonomy so that they can make their own decisions about their own destiny in their own lives. It also seeks to witness to the truth of injustice when we see, experience or witness that injustice. And for MSF, humanitarian action also seeks to provoke change, by showing, by demonstrating that change is possible. And finally, and this is the most difficult if you will element of humanitarian action, finally it is to locate and to insist on political responsibility. Now in principle, humanitarian action is very simple to describe, but in practice is it very difficult to achieve. Humanitarianism is not simply about food, about medicines, and about blankets. It is in fact a first and daily imperfect struggle that is limited in means and is a struggle to create a space to be human and insisting that this space be respected.

Now for Engineers Without Borders, development is not war. The context in which you work will be very different. But development cannot, as with our experience in war, as with our experience famines and epidemics development like humanitarianism cannot simply be about technical solutions to puzzling questions, it must also be about confronting and engaging the human reality of the people and the issues that you seek to address and that you seek to bring some assistance to. You cannot walk away from the context in which you are seeking to provide technical solutions.

For MSF this has meant adhering to a set of basic principles and particularly because humanitarianism in war, humanitarianism in famine, humanitarianism in situations of outrageous human suffering is not an easy task. Now there are at least 3 time tested principles that make the task humanitarianism in war particularly achievable. The first is universality - that all victims are worthy of assistance and protection wherever they may be. The second is impartiality - that assistance and humanitarian protection is given to all victims of a conflict no matter which side they're on, regardless of race, of religion, of political or other affiliation, and that this assistance is given strictly and proportionately according to need and to need alone. The third principle is independence - that humanitarian actors must remain independent of political or other affiliations whose interest may impinge on universality and impartiality. Now a fourth principle is neutrality and probably one of the best known. Neutrality is the traditional view that humanitarian actors must stand apart from the political issues at stake in a conflict. In so doing, in standing apart from the political issues in a conflict, humanitarian actors must refrain from comment on any action by a belligerent that may affect the perception if you will of their political propriety or political independence. MSF departed from this traditional view of neutrality and in fact it was this departure 33 years ago that was the genesis or the creation of the MSF movement.

Now let me just tell you about the history of MSF. It's instructive. It tells why MSF is what it is,

why we do what we do and in particular it illuminates our particular stance on neutrality, and it demonstrates why voice or speaking out is so central to the identity that MSF has forged for itself. Now MSF was founded in 1971 by a group of French doctors and journalists. In 1968 some of these same doctors had worked for the Red Cross in Nigeria where civil war and government oppression had led to massive famine. Now on one particular day, the doctors were working in a small Biafran clinic, on that day the clinic was overrun by villagers who were fleeing Nigerian soldier, the doctors notified RedCross headquarters and were ordered to abandon their posts. Now they refused. In staying they witnessed the wholesale carnage as Nigerian troops slaughtered unarmed men, women and children. The doctors quit the RedCross and when they returned to France they told the world about what they had seen. Three years later in 1971 Medecins sans frontieres was formed by this group of French doctors and a group of journalists who had joined the original group of doctors. And it was formed because Medecins sans frontieres was outraged at the fact that the RedCross' interpretation then and I note then, on international humanitarian law prevented them from speaking out against what was effectively a state policy of forced starvation and forced migration. It was a reaction to the same view of neutrality that had led the RedCross to remain silent in its knowledge to the Nazi extermination camps used in the holocaust of World War 2. Now in the years since 1971, MSF has told the world about atrocities that local governments have tried to hide. In 1979, for example, we told the world about thousands of Yapanese who were fleeing their country in small fishing boats. In 1985, MSF alerted the world of famine in Ethiopia even though this meant that we would be expelled from the country. We have taken these and many more controversial positions and actions all in an ethic of refusal. Now for many silence has long been confuse with neutrality and has been presented as a necessary condition for humanitarian action. Well for MSF the organization was founded by standing in opposition to this assumption. For MSF, voice coupled with action is central to the identity of the MSF movement.

Now in 1994, I was Medecins sans frontieres' Head of Mission in Kigali, Rwanda during the genocide when only the Red Cross, Medecins sans frontieres and Unimare was present in the country. Now the genocide meant that (tootsi) people were seen as (iniense) or (tootsi) insects and to quote the Rwandan radio at the time "They must be crushed like insects." Now one night in Kigali after many long hours of surgery from the hospital balcony I watched packs of dogs that were roaming the streets. Now these dogs, they were fat, they were hungry, and they were vicious and they were virtually wild with the taste of human flesh. They were fighting with each other over the remains of a corpse that lay in the street. They were threatening to attack a man who had ventured outside of the hospital fence in search of firewood. Now later that night among the thousands of people we either treated or gave shelter to at the hospital, a little girl of about nine told me through an interpreter how she escaped murder at the hand of the (...) killing squads. She told me "My mother hid me in the latrine; I saw through the hole. I watched them hit her with machetes. I watched my mother's arm fall into my father's blood on the floor. And I cried without noise in the toilet." Now during that time around Rwanda (...) and (...) were being butchered in a systematic, rational way. And they were crushed like insects. People were killed in their homes, or after being assembled in churches, in schools, in hospitals, or bussed or marched to masquerades where they were not shot, but had their hands and feet cut off bleeding

to death and being unable to climb out of their graves. The people often begged or paid to have their children shot rather than to suffer this particular inhumanity.

Now humanitarianism is a human response to suffering and to the political failure that creates or allows suffering to go unchecked. It's an immediate short termed act that attempts to create the space to be human and that cannot erase political responsibility with public security at the national or international level. Now as humanitarians, our responsibility is what Albert Camus called "doctors as witnesses." It is to witness authentically to the reality of inhumanity and I do not see it as a far stretch to see Albert Camus at some point be referred to in thinking about engineers as witnesses so that you too can witness authentically to the reality of inhumanity, and to speak out in the face of moral pollomosis of political failure or political inaction. Now in Rwanda as doctors, we could not stop the genocide and were you there as engineers without borders, you could not stop the genocide either. Now like war crimes and crimes against humanity genocide is a political crime that by definition defies the very essence of the space to be human. Stopping genocide is not a humanitarian act and nor would it be a development oriented act. It is in fact a political imperative to stop genocide.

And you must learn your place relative to the other forces that exist in the world today just as MSF has learned to define through regular questioning its place relative to the other forces that exist in the world today. MSF is a civil society organization, an association, and Engineers Without Borders is also a civil society organization or association. It has an informal legitimacy, an informal power relative to the formal power and the formal legitimacy of the state and of intergovernmental state organizations. And you must recognize that in some of the issues, some of the dilemmas that you will inevitably confront, you must use some of your informal power, and your informal authority, and your informal legitimacy to insist that those who have formal power, to those who have formal legitimacy and to those who have formal authority to insist that they assume their political responsibilities in addressing outrageous human suffering or in addressing situations where there is nothing short than an outrageous political crime taking place. And in your chosen task or your chosen focus in development, you will most certainly face dilemmas - perhaps not as extreme as what MSF has faced for example in Rwanda. But you will face dilemmas and you will face questions and face them if you are to be a viable, effective and powerful organization, you must face those issues, those questions, and those dilemmas. And if you're doing your job right, you will be confronted by dilemmas.

Now international development is a phrase that captures the project if you will of state craft -- a project that has taken place over the last forty to fifty years. It also captures the power and the potential and the freedom of civil society organizations like Engineers Without Borders. Now the term international development very much applies to the post-colonial United Nations protectorate period that followed the calamity of World War 2. International development has a new meaning since the end of the Cold War in Korea that followed the post-colonial UN protectorate period. During the Cold War, east-west rivalries and military deterrents meant that the so-called third world became battleground of both east-west ideologies and the sights of

many proxy wars.

Today at the end of the Cold War, we see perhaps according to some the decline of the nation-state and the emergence of what some are calling the market-state. Here, in that particular market-state system that some argue is emerging, outrageous injustice for the poor will accelerate and these are not simply technical questions that require technical solutions. They are not technical questions that will require a shinier water faucet, a better solar panel, a better software package for information technology. These are questions not of technicality, but questions of access: access to water, access to sanitation, access to food, access to shelter, access to technology, whether it's information technology, solar technology or telecommunications technology. You will, you must confront not simply the technical questions but also the broader underlining, protectorate questions of access. And if you are doing your job right, you will face these questions and you will see them if you are doing them right, you will see them as dilemmas - by definition a dilemma is a situation wherein there is no apparently right answer. And in that situation you have three choices: 1) you can walk away from the question, 2) you can impale yourself on both horns of the dilemma and kill yourself essentially by actually achieving nothing, and 3) you can engage in the dilemma and you can live it and you can challenge it and you can examine it and you can illuminate the question rather than simply provide technical answers that may in fact be the wrong answer. And so here, the questions matter as much, if not in fact more, than the answers you will be able to provide.

And so I come back to the three questions. What is your vision? You've articulated that development is freedom. You've articulated that you work with and that you respect developing communities. You've articulated that you use appropriate technology and you have articulated that you recognize that development is much more than technology. It is empowerment. It is allowing and supporting another to help themselves. It is allowing and supporting another to their own self-determination. Now this is a very powerful vision. Now having articulated the vision you have a responsibility, a responsibility to make that vision live. It cannot simply be words on a paper; you must make it live.

What is your action? Your action, it seems is engineering at large and that's a good thing in the sense that there is a clearly defined focus. From what I can see thus far of your projects, you're focusing on water, on sanitation, on small-scale infrastructure, and thus far on information technology. It is a very clearly identified skill set. And that's very important. In order to be successful as an organization you need focus and you need clarity about your skills, about your knowledge, and about your assets. Most importantly, you must be pragmatic in the application of those skills, of those knowledge, and of those assets because in the process of being pragmatic, you will first of all achieve something or not. If you don't, then you can ask why intelligently. You can pursue an analysis of your situation in a way that yields intelligent monitoring, intelligent evaluation, and intelligent revisioning of where you are going with your particular of your skills, of your knowledge and of your assets.

Finally, what is your voice? Well I think this is an open question for Engineers Without Borders

and I can tell you and I think I have told you that for MSF, voice is one of the key elements of the identity of the MSF movement. Advocacy or in French, temoignage, which translates more appropriately to 'witnessing', witnessing and engaging in advocacy is the key element that distinguishes Medecins sans frontieres or Doctors Without Borders from a plethora of other organizations.

But let me tell you something about voice. You can change the world with your voice. Let me repeat that. You can change the world with your voice. Medecins sans frontieres in 1998 launched an access to essential medicines campaign. When we launched that campaign, one of the greatest obstacles to actually getting that campaign started was not outside the organization, but it was inside the organization. There were many doctors inside Medecins sans frontieres who argued that we're doctors. We provide medical care to people who need it. We do lab tests. We monitor their blood. We look at their clinical situation. We reevaluate their clinical status and we modify our therapy for them. That's what doctors do.

Well, myself as president of the organization then and many others inside the organization started a campaign inside the organization to change that idea and to make people realize that as doctors they have a responsibility not only to pursue the provision of excellence in care but also to pursue people's right to health care and to ensure that every single human being has a right to exist. And that we as physicians bring to bear on their situation our skill, our knowledge, and our voice to demand their dignity as human beings be respected and that it be respected for us in terms that we know best - in terms of access to health care, in terms of access to humanitarian assistance in war, in terms of access to anti-retro virus treatment of AIDS for example.

Today over 42 million people live with HIV around the world. Less than 3 million of those 42 million people have access to anti-retro virus. Now AIDS is a fully treatable infectious disease; it is a fully treatable and manageable chronic disease like diabetes. The only thing standing in the way of access to that treatment for those 39 million people is rapacious patent protection by the pharmaceutical industry. Now over the last 4 years, MSF launched a campaign to ensure access essential medicines particularly to anti-retro virus to people living with HIV. We clearly articulated a set of principled ideas that I was talking about. We've made coalitions with other non-governmental organizations all over the world - treatment access campaign in South Africa, a group in Guatemala, a group in Honduras, a group in Cambodia, a group in Brazil, with Act Up in United States and Europe. And we continually articulate our ideas that underlay our vision of humanitarian assistance and our vision of people's right to exist and our vision of the responsibility of governments to take appropriate action to ensure that people have access to health care.

Over that 4 year period we've had many, many failures and many successes. Two years ago we brought that struggle to the World Trade Organization. The World Trade Organization finally under enormous pressure from this coalition of NGOs, in large part led by Medecins sans frontieres, finally bent under pressure and declared that trade interests cannot override the duty and responsibility of states to protect, to pursue, and to promote public health in situations for

example as outrageous as the AIDS epidemic, the tuberculosis epidemic, the malaria epidemic, and any publicly declared health care emergency. Now that's an enormous political accomplishment.

Three days ago President George Bush announced to the State of the Union Address that the United States government will give 15 billion dollars for the AIDS epidemic in Africa alone, that 10 billion dollars of the 15 billion is new money. And in his preamble to that statement, he noted that the price of anti-retro virus has fallen from 15 thousand US dollars for a pack of 10 regimen per patient per year to less than 3 hundred dollars for a generic version of the same treatment. Now that line has been the central argument, the core piece of information for the access to essential medicines campaign. Now for the line to go from a fluffy idea in 1998 and to have gone through, to transform, and to build a coalition of civil society organizations around the world, and to bring a Republican president of the United States to the point where he will declare that the United States government is finally going to assume its political responsibility in dealing with the AIDS epidemic. To me that's evidence that we can change the world.

And you can do the same.

You have to be clear about your vision, about your action, and about your voice. Now underlying the clarity of your vision, your action, and your voice are a few issues. One is independence. MSF is politically independent from any economic, governmental, religious or any other power or influence. It's also operationally independent. Underlying both political and operational independence is financial independence. We can go anywhere in the world. We can start a project at any time. Within 24 hours, we can launch a major intervention to deal with a humanitarian issue.

Now we didn't get that way over night, nor will you get that way overnight. But we started with the aspiration. We knew that if we were going to be genuinely effective, genuinely powerful, we had to be genuinely independent. Over the last 15 years approximately, MSF has gone from 50% of its funding coming from governments to now less than 18% of its funding coming from governments. 82% of MSF's money comes from private citizen donations from around the world - approximately 3 million donors all over the world who support the project of MSF.

That means that in Kosovo, when NATO started its bombing campaign, that we were able to be completely financially, operationally, and politically independent of NATO and of NATO members, that we were able to provide humanitarian assistance to Albanians and Serbs alike, and I can tell you that in Kosovo, there were very few organizations that were in that position. And I can tell you that in Kosovo, there were very few organizations that were genuinely trusted by Serbs and Albanians alike.

And I can genuinely tell you that that is the nature and essence of independence and the nature and essence of humanitarian action. It is to be free to act according to your own values, according to your own vision, to your own action, and to your own voice. Independence is

crucial. You must aspire to be independent and you must also recognize that it will take time. But you will never get there unless you aspire to you, unless you set clear benchmarks that you mover towards each year.

Finally, let me talk a little bit about culture. The culture of MSF is very much a culture of debate. It's a culture where ideas matter, where dissenting views are tolerated, where they are not just tolerated, not just encouraged but they enforce people to articulate their dissent, to lay out an argument, to engage in a process of debate. Now why do we do that? Why do we create within the organization the basis for debate? We do it because it then clarifies the action of the organization. And when we create a space for debate and when you allow for genuine debate, all people in the organization can articulate the issues or the assumptions behind a particular action and all people in the organization, even if they don't agree with the final position that the organization takes, its final operational direction, its final temoignage or advocacy position, they will support it because there has been a viable process whereby all people's voice matters.

And it also makes the organization far more able to be effective, to challenge its own actions, and to challenge the actions of others. One of the means to create this space for debate is to have within the organization a very healthy system of internal competition, where different chapters and different sectors are in constant competition with each other in pursuit of excellence. And I can see within Engineers Without Borders the same kind of potential of helping internal competition, and that competition takes place with a fairly clearly articulated, coherent, external view.

Let me just begin to close by noting that as you pursue the questions of vision, of action, and of voice don't let accolades change you, don't let the complements of others sway you. MSF, as you know was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and that has not changed the face of the organization and I say this to you as I can see as Dr. Johnston can see the same potential within this organization. MSF does not do what it does for accolades and nor should any of you do what you do whether it's with Engineers Without Borders or anywhere in your live. You shouldn't do anything for the sake of the aggrandizement of someone else towards you. MSF in fact is often criticized by governments, by international government organizations, by other NGOs, and deeply so internally. And yes, there are sometimes accolades for MSF and this is for what it does. But the power of MSF is in its clarity of focus, is in its clarity of its vision, clarity of its action, clarity of its voice, and its willingness to expose the questions, the dilemmas that it inevitably confronts, to engage debate around those questions. And to maintain independence and to maintain and grow a culture that allows for a continuous articulation of vision, of action and of voice.

Now let me close by noting that embedded in my talk this evening has been the unstated, the implicit responsibility or the imperative to stand against injustice. Now the economist and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has argued that poverty and injustice and the injustice that often accompanies poverty, that these are not simply about economics but more deeply about a fundamental lack of freedoms. It's also about the choices of we who are free. More simply put it's

about we who are free - how we use our liberty. We here in this room are free to use our liberty in whatever way we choose.

Through your action or through your inaction, through your voice or through your silence your will shape the world around you. I ask you, particularly the young members of Engineers Without Borders, I ask you to use your liberty and skill you have gained and will gain through studying and training to act and to insist that the basic dignity of the excluded, that marginalized, the unprotected, that they be acknowledged in their full humanity, that all people have a space to be human.

These are the women and children that I spoke about earlier on at MSF feeding centers, around the world. This is the nine year old Rwandan girl who cried without noise in the toilet. These are the millions of men, women, and children without access to anti-retrovirals. They have a right to exist in the space that is human. Why? Because it's possible for that space to exist. It's possible for that space to exist. It's every single man, woman, and child who may fall prey to disease, to political oppression or negligence. I'm asking you to use your liberty to be who you are -- free people who can knowingly choose to make life more bearable for the other.

The "other" is not some anonymous object to be ignored with indifference and not as Jean-Paul Centre put it "your hell." The other is your brother and your sister who shares in our common humanity. I ask you to not be paralyzed by fear and don't be anaesthetized by false hope, by dreams or by quick-fix solutions. But do live what is possible through courage and through choice and through an irreducible respect for human dignity.

Finally I would like to say that fear and false hope are overcome by what we do which can be very much in defiance to the apparent futility of reality. It takes real courage to face fear. It takes real courage to overcome false hope. It takes real courage to do. And I think if you look, you'll find courage in the most unlikely of places. You'll always find your own courage in the eyes of the others. And I ask you to cherish the questions that emerge from your engagement in the world around you. And you probably will find that if you cherish the questions in retrospect you may find that you lift yourself into the answers. In doing this you can only but acknowledge and grow and enrich our own humanity.

I wish you every bit of luck and every bit of success with Engineers Without Borders. It's been a pleasure. Good night.