

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF MEDICO FRIEND CIRCLE

A BRIEF OVERVIEW (Jun'88)

INTRODUCTION

This note is primarily meant for prospective core-group members to appraise them of the organizational development and status of MFC. But it will be useful for the current core-group members for the purpose of self-clarification and for discussions on organizational policy matters in future. It portrays the evolving process of our development and explores our strengths, our weaknesses and the opportunities as well as the threats to further growth.

This note is a supplement to the printed leaflet which briefly gives an introduction of MFC. This note is also an attempt at an internal audit and must be read in that light. It is hoped that it will challenge all of us to think about the future more creatively.

1. The Role of MFC

1.1. In the initial period after the formation of M.F.C., there was a substantial amount of debate both in the pages of the MFC-bulletin and in several group discussions about the role of MFC. The debate in the bulletin has been included in the anthology : HEALTH CARE, WHICH WAY TO GO ? and it is worth going through this debate and the consensus that emerged at the end of it. Only a very brief summary is attempted here:

The founders of MFC (the original 'core group' of 1973, which had links with Jayaprakash Narayan and the Bihar Movement) were primarily motivated to aid the process of fundamental socio-economic and political change. On account of this motivation, they invited and were joined by other ' medico-friends ' (not all doctors) of liberal, Marxist and other background. Therefore, in the initial Annual - Meetings, the discussions were very directly overshadowed by this consideration of social revolution. What is more important, the content of the discussions tended to rapidly gravitate to economico-political issues. This resulted in disastrous consequences, viz :

- i) younger newcomers like medical students thought that MFC was a sort of platform for political debate, perhaps a recruiting ground for political organizations and they had not come to MFC for such things;
- ii) for health activists no concrete programme in the health field could emerge from the discussions and in that sense, these discussions were sterile; and
- iii) since MFC consists of people from various political / ideological backgrounds, there was a danger that political debates would eventually lead to the splitting of MFC into many groups, without any advantage to the health-movement. The concept of a friends circle would also be in danger.

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After much debate, introspection and also after paying a price in terms of the disappointment of many new comers.... etc., we decided at an important meeting in Sevagram in 1979 that in MFC we should focus on Health-issues and include the directly and concretely relevant socio-economic-political issues involved without getting entangled in the general economic-political issues and debates. The newer pamphlet (1981) meant to introduce MFC's general perspective to the newcomer, reflected the minimum common understanding of MFC about the health system.

1.2 Attempts were made to make MFC active organizationally to lobby for certain reforms in the medical system and to critically respond to government's initiatives or the lack of it, on health-issues. But there were many problems. Most MFC-members are so involved in local work that they do not get much time for MFC's Organizational work. India is a vast country and social conditions are such that for any change to occur at the national level, a great deal of organizational mobilization is required. At least for the present, MFC-members are not in a position to function even as an effective watch dog body at the national level. It is, as of today, primarily a platform of like-minded critical health activists and a 'thought-current.' This in itself has a kind of an impact in health circles; but that is all !!

1.3 Attempts were made and are being made to form a loose 'MFC-group' at a local level, by taking up some collective action from MFC-perspective at the local level. In the earlier period, regional study camps to study a health issue through field work helped to consolidate MFC-identity at regional-cum-local level. The 'Rewa-Camp' conducted in 1978 to analyse the problem of Lathyrism in all its aspects was a successful, self-educating experience. But unfortunately such efforts were not repeated later.

2. The Core-Group

The core-group is only an informal group of MFC members who are concerned about and work for the growth of MFC. It is also a friends-circle and a platform for full fledged heated debates and warm exchanges ! The 'criteria' for requesting a member to become a part of the core-group, is that the member must have attended at least one annual-meet so that all core-group members meet him/her in person, and atleast somebody in the existing core-group should know the person well enough to be able to judge whether he/she can fit into the current 'culture' of the core-group - heated debates, yet getting along together, learning from each other and also being able to face the not so pleasant organizational weaknesses of MFC. Any core-group member who does not attend two consecutive core-group meetings, or annual meetings without even writing to the Convenor automatically drops out of the core-group.

MFC badly needs more core-group members--those who would spend time and energy for MFC's organizational growth. Due to the all round steep increase in the costs, running of the bulletin and maintaining MFC's Offices (now three !) has become more and more difficult - lack of money and lack of human-power has almost threatened the very existence of MFC.

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3. Role of Annual-meets and Core-group meets

This issue has been a very important issue right from the beginning since apart from the Publication of the bulletin, annual meets and core-group meets are the only two other regular collective activities of MFC.

In the initial years, the annual meets were seen as mainly to expose interns and the like to MFC, its perspective; and also to consolidate MFC's general perspective. As time went by, most of the core-group members ceased to have any link with the medical colleges and hence there were now not many interns in our contact circle. Secondly, due to the Shibir like Annual-meets, the old members did not get anything new to learn. Similarly many new MFC-members were persons who had some expertise or experience in the field of health and they also did not like the Shibir like annual-meets; and experience showed that the collective knowledge, understanding of MFC was enriched by the new inputs from those new members who had experience or expertise in the field of health. After a lot of discussion, it was finally decided in a Core-group-meet in Hyderabad (in 1983) that influencing interns or housemen is not the function of the annual-meets. This work has to be done at a local level by core-group members. The aims of the annual meets, as they have emerged through experience and discussions are outlined as follows :-

3.1. Annual Meets

3.1.1 To develop, share and enrich our collective understanding of the various aspects of the health system in India. Somewhat wideranging topics should be chosen so that doctors, health workers working in different aspects of health, new resource persons, senior workers working in different areas of health, would also come to MFC-meets, would know about MFC in detail, and the MFC circle would broaden in different directions.

3.1.2 To meet in person, those individuals whom we have met only through the bulletin or through correspondence. To know each other's experiences, ideas, feelings is an important function of the annual meet. Conscious efforts have to be made to see that the annual meet is not totally dominated by the theme-discussion, but that getting to know each other, making friends, broadening the circle also takes place.

3.1.3 Forming a lobby-group, or collectively getting involved in our action around an issue is not the aim of the annual-meet. To arrive at an 'action-programme' as a routine in the final session of the annual meet and then not to follow it (given the nature and limitations of MFC) is worthless as well as frustrating. We would, however, try to arrive at conclusions (which may be in the form of divided opinions also) so that something concrete emerges out of the discussion. Secondly, some areas for our further study would also be outlined. If some participants want to carry

out some action programme on the issue, that is most welcome; but MFC is not in a position to take up 'action-programme' as one of the aims of the annual-meets.

3.1.4 Getting to know in detail, the project or the institution which hosts the meet is not the aim of the meet. There will, of course, be a brief introduction, but for those who want to see the project/institution, separate arrangement should be made before or after the meet with consultation with the hosts. Through trial and error a distinctive mode of discussion at the annual meet has been evolved. The Note : ' The aim and the method of discussion at the MFC annual meets ' gives some details regarding this.

3.2 : Core Group Meets : Initially, core group meetings were dominated by debates about the role of MFC, evaluation of earlier annual meet, organizational matters, preparation of anthologies, arrangements for regional camps, annual meets etc...etc. It has been a friends' circle and all sorts of issues were also debated. Once basic things were sorted out, more attention was paid to the content of the annual meet.

3.2.1 Apart from discussion on organizational matters, it was thought that much more time should be given to the discussion on the content of the coming annual meet. A pattern has emerged : after the annual meet at January-end, the topic for the next annual meet is tentatively decided, a few persons take up the task of doing some exploratory work and in the coming core group meet, they present the main issues for discussion. These presentations and the discussions about the issues give a more concrete idea about what needs to be done to organize a good discussion in the coming annual meet.

Recently, it was thought that we should write a summary booklet based on the background papers and discussions of the annual meets, since the material and the discussions are generally of good quality. For want of space, this material can't be put in the bulletin. The booklet would reflect the consensus of MFC (if that is not possible, more than one viewpoint would be reflected) on that issue, drawing liberally from the facts, figures, arguments in the annual meet papers and discussions. Somebody would write a draft, to be circulated in advance amongst core group members. After discussing the draft and the comments, a final draft would be prepared, again to be approved by a committee of volunteers. If there are any sharp differences of opinion, then they would be clearly spelt out by respective persons.

Alongwith somewhat indepth discussion of the issue in the forthcoming annual-meet, indepth discussion on the theme of the previous meet would also take place in the core group meet. For example, there was a very sharp and good debate on the issue of critique of the National Tuberculosis Control Programme.

3.2.2 The core group meets were so dominated by discussions on the annual meets and organizational matters that we found that we had stopped sharing and analysing our experiences in a systematic manner --one of the main reasons why we are meeting together ! It was, therefore, decided at the Khandala-meet in 1985, that we should consciously devote a few hours during the mid annual core group meet for some systematic sharing of what each of us has been doing, what are the problems one is facing, what has been the achievement etc. There will be feed-back, comments, friendly advice etc., after each sharing; but systematic, indepth discussion would take place only on some issues / experiences selected by the whole group. Otherwise indepth discussions can continue amongst interested individuals, once initial discussion has taken place collectively.

The mid-annual core group meet would, therefore, consist of three days as follows :-

- (1) Preparation for the coming annual meet-1 day
- (2) Sharing by core group members - $\frac{1}{2}$ day
- (3) Discussion on the draft of the booklet based on the last annual meet, or any other theoretical presentation, draft
- $\frac{1}{2}$ day
- (4) Organizational matters- 1 day.

Those core group members who want to see the work of our hosts in some detail, would come earlier or stay back for this purpose. It is expected that at least a few would be interested in such a special visit. (The rest of the core group would of course have a brief introduction to the project.) If nobody wants to see the project in any detail, there is not much point in going out of the way to a corner for the core group meet. The Ashram at Sevagram is quite a central and convenient place.

It is hoped that in the coming core group meets, there would be a much more fruitful, indepth, systematic discussion, sharing and interaction at the individual level.

4. Convener-ship/Editorship, Editorial policy :

4.1. MFC's Convener and Editor change every two years or so. This is an attempt at sharing the responsibility in rotation so as to give scope for newer ideas from different persons. Those who have been Conveners or Editors have a first hand experience of the woes of this work, and hence, a more sympathetic and co-operative, responsible attitude develops vis-a-vis the current Convener, Editor. As time goes by, the work of the Convener is becoming more or less of full-time nature. This is also true for the Editor if he/she has to look after the printing

and despatch of the bulletin as well. Ways must be found to reduce the burden of the editor and the convenor. This is a dilemma which has not been solved. Paucity of members, lack of organizational discipline, lack of funds -all have been knotty problems. Unless membership and subscriptions increase, it would be difficult for MFC to survive, let alone grow, for purely financial reasons.

4.2 The Editorial Policy has emerged through the experience of last ten years. It has now been formalized in a brief note meant for prospective authors.

5. Funds:

5.1. MFC has always been short of funds. Initially the losses in the publication of the bulletin which was the most important activity of MFC; (Now the annual meets are also as important) was about a couple of thousand rupees a year. This was made good by collecting individual donations from sympathisers. But this loss has now mounted upto Rs. 5000.00 per year. We got a donation of Rs.5000/- twice from the Nutrition Foundation of India; but this was only a temporary solution. Additionally, the office-expenses of the MFC convenor and that of the Rational Drug Policy Cell / registered Office are also there. Unless we increase our subscribers and members, we would not be able to survive without losing our financial autonomy.

5.2 The idea of having a full-timer for MFC and its financial implications have been discussed several times. The idea is : we come across so many people who did not know about MFC and have immediately become members after knowing about MFC, reading the MFC-bulletin or anthologies. If a full-timer can travel around the country or a part of it, to medical colleges, science and health groups, institutions etc., we may get many new members. But this required :

- i) a proper person who is both capable of and willing to represent MFC;
- ii) core group members should be able to help such a full-timer by helping him/her own area in various ways;
- iii) funds from a proper source.

The last requirement is as important as the other two. By and large, MFC has avoided taking outside institutional funds. The most important reason is unless the major part of any movement's activity, at or at least its core activity is financed from members and sympathisers or through sale of literature.....etc., outside institutional financing tends to be harmful in the long run by pushing back voluntary effort and voluntary commitment. MFC has been an expression of a critical current in the health field, of 'movement' (understood in a broad sense) and if MFC starts becoming dependent upon outside institutional funds, it may become an institution. Such institutes are likely (thought not necessarily) to degenerate into one of those institutions which are run because there are funds and paid full-timers, irrespective of the social need for such an institution.

5.3 Fully recognising the possible danger of outside institutional funds for a full-timer, MFC twice decided to take such funds on a temporary basis because growth in the number of members and subscribers has become such a vital question. There was an explicit condition that if after two years, there is no appreciable increase in memberships and internal financing to make MFC financially self-reliant, we would stop taking such funds. Unfortunately in both the instances, the individuals who had offered to work as full-timers, withdrew their offer for personal reasons.

5.4 Twice, MFC has taken funds from OXFAM (Rs. 5000.00 and Rs.10,000.00 respectively) for its first two anthologies. There were no conditions set by OXFAM and taking these funds has not affected MFC's financial autonomy or self-reliance. Though our anthologies sell well, the proceeds of sale of these anthologies are not always sufficient to bring out the next anthology. Funds for publications are thus going to be a problem. So long as MFC is serving a socially felt need, is based on voluntary commitment, funds from even a foreign funding agency like OXFAM is not excluded. We reiterate that we are fully aware of the problems and potential dangers of outside institutional financing especially from a foreign source.

6. Administrative Cell :

Since some organizational matters are primarily of an administrative nature (preparation of budget, fulfilling official requirements...etc.) it was thought that there is no point in the whole of the General Body or the Core Group to spend time on such matters. An Administrative Cell has been set up since 1985, consisting of a few past convenors, the present convenor and a couple of 'experts.' They meet prior to the annual general body meeting and work out the details of some of the organizational matters and present it to the general body. The General Body may modify their plans if necessary. This arrangement for administrative matters leaves more time for the general body to focus on policy-issues or other important matters.

7. MFC's Involvement : Bhopal-Disaster, Rational Drug Policy Cell :

7.1 Bhopal : MFC's involvement in Bhopal has been the only collective organizational effort (apart from the Bulletin and Annual-meets) of some major significance. Several core group members stretched themselves to the full to conduct two important studies on the gas exposed people, to prepare educational pamphlets for them and to participate in medical relief. The first of these studies was the only published, community based epidemiological study available on the over-all health effect of the gas leak on the exposed population.

MFC can thus rise to the occasion and play an important role. But by and large, it remains a platform and thought current.

7.2 Rational Drug Policy Cell : Concretely criticising irrationalities in the production and use of drugs and putting forward alternatives, has been one of the activities of MFC-members. MFC has, therefore, been an active part of the coming of various groups interested in drug issues from different parts of the country to form the All India Drug Action Network (AIDAN). The movement for a Rational Drug Policy, has been one of the rare examples of different groups coming together on a health-issue and preparing a substantial critique of the National Policy and an equally solid, concrete alternative to it. MFC-members have contributed to this movement by participating in seminars, newspaper campaigns, lobbying with the government and in the formulation of the perspective of AIDAN. A Rational Drug Policy Cell has been formed to look after MFC's involvement in this issue. The two studies published by this cell (rationality studies of antidiarrhoeal and analgesic mixtures) have been found to be very useful in the drug-campaign.

8. Modalities to represent and pursue work on behalf of MFC:

There is lots of action and campaign going in the health and related field in India, in which MFC either at local/regional or national level is required to or is asked to participate. Core group members are always in dilemma what to do in such a situation ? Is MFC simply a thought current, and no active participation is possible or MFC should respond to these issues if there is possibility ? Local MFC group may participate in such activities. It is understood that core group - members are those who understand the ethos of MFC and would not take any decision contrary to the traditions and perspective of MFC. It is in this spirit that following norms were decided in the core-group meet at Wardha in June, 1988 :

- 1) When an individual or group of MFC core Group members feel the need or are requested to represent on the committee, he/she may do so and inform the convener.
- 2) If the issue is of national or regional importance then also he/she can take action, but it will be discussed in the next following core group meeting and the members should be present for consultation.
- 3) If there is difference of opinion, local group will act in trust given the autonomy of the group. Simple majority decision will not be the criteria for rethinking.

9. To be or not to be : MFC has survived many crises and that reflects its inner strength. But recently, once again doubts have been raised about the very existence of MFC because of -

- 1) stagnation in subscriptions & membership at a very low level, making it even financially difficult to continue;

- ii) a feeling that the original aim of aiding the social revolution is not being served (social revolution is not around the corner as was once thought !) Many core group - members have developed their own areas of creativity and involvement; and do not really gain anything from MFC--this is shown in declining participation and enthusiasm in even writing for the bulletin and all other MFC-matters;
- iii) new members are interested only in a particular theme of the annual meet; and not in the organization. Hence, there is a very high turnover rate of new members. It was, therefore, suggested that MFC has outplayed its role and there is no point in continuing only for sentimental reasons.

This suggestion, made by a core group member in a letter to the Convenor before the recent mid-annual core group meet at Pachod in July '87, was discussed seriously at this meet. It was agreed that the above argument is true to a certain extent, but there are the following countervailing reasons for which MFC has a definite role to play and we need to continue to exist as an entity :-

1.... MFC has, over a period of twelve years, developed a very healthy tradition. Doctors ~~and other health activists~~ from different ideological backgrounds have debated, shared their ideas and experiences from a pro-people perspective in a non-sectarian and non-dogmatic manner and have developed a feeling of solidarity despite continuing differences. Very critical, honest, informal, indepth discussions on socially vital health issues by people who are themselves engaged in health action at grass root level is an achievement in the context of the presently prevailing overall socio-political culture in our country of opportunism, short-sightedness, and sectarianism. It would be wrong to liquidate such a tradition.

2.... Many activists, look upon MFC as a source which would give them a critical, non-medicalized view point about different issues in health. The Bhopal-studies have underlined the important role MFC would play. There is a social need for such a group to continue. The Convenor gets scores of letters from new members who are thrilled to know about MFC, its perspective, books and who readily join MFC.

Though MFC would not grow the way it did in the initial years, it continues to get new members and even core group members. New core group members also expressed the view that they found MFC to be a very stimulating, useful, serious honest platform.

Therefore, it was, decided to continue though with our fingers crossed !!