

MSF Carbon Footprint target – Q&A

March 2022

What is your carbon footprint? Why haven't you published your carbon footprint like some other organizations?

We don't have complete data on our carbon footprint. We are a decentralized organization of more than 40,000 full time positions and we are present in over seventy countries. Measuring our carbon footprint is a complex task, but we have started. We are working on measuring the full extent of our footprint and defining a road map with concrete steps to reduce our emissions. Some MSF entities have partnered up with an external organization who is accompanying them in finding solutions and methodologies for turning commitments into action. We are committed to making sure we act in an environmentally responsible way. It will take some time, but we are taking this very seriously.

Why did you wait until now to set a target?

Like the overwhelming majority of society, we are late. Scientists have been raising the alarm for decades, yet somehow the world has failed to listen and act. We failed to act earlier and now we need to make up for lost time. The sooner we start, the higher chance we have to meet our goals. This decade truly will be decisive and we must all do our share.

We have already committed, through the adoption of an Environmental Pact in November 2020, to reduce our environmental footprint and we think it is important to set a target as it will spur us to reach our objectives faster.

Why is 2019 the baseline for the target?

Our activities, and consequently our emissions, have grown over the years as we have increased our emergency medical response across the globe. 2019 represents the levels we were at before the COVID-19 pandemic started, during which our emissions decreased.

What are you doing to reduce your footprint?

We have taken and are taking a number of steps. We have started measuring our emissions and have put in place initiatives to improve energy use and waste management. We need to rapidly scale up these activities and are working to measure the full extent of our footprint and define a road map with concrete steps to reduce our emissions. Several MSF sections have partnered up with an external organization who is accompanying them in finding solutions and methodologies for turning commitments into action. We already have an idea of where the bulk of our emissions lie, and now we are working to find and implement solutions.

What does this mean concretely?

It means we need to find concrete, sustainable solutions to carry out our medical mission, by reducing energy use, and by ensuring we use our resources in the most efficient and environmentally responsible way. For example, we have analysed our supply chain and we know it is a key contributor to our emissions. Changing what, how and where we buy what we need to run our health centres and hospitals, and how we ship it to our projects, will make a big difference. We know we need to rely much more on sea freight instead of airfreight.

In the field, it means rationalizing the use of transport, using renewable technology like solar panels instead of fuel generators, reducing our over-reliance on single use medical items, using less

polluting or energy consuming products, producing less waste and increase efforts to improve waste treatment practices. Overall, being more thoughtful of how we use energy in general: adding up many small changes will make a difference on our larger footprint.

In our headquarters, it means reducing air travel to what is strictly necessary, moving our offices to a new energy-efficient and sustainably built building, sobering up energy use, even on seemingly smaller things like digital use and storage.

For an organization of our size and nature, it is quite a considerable task and will take some time, the first step is to find all the solutions and make the means available.

How are you going to continue helping people in different parts of the world while going green at the same time? Will you stop flying?

Reducing our carbon footprint means we will change how we use energy, manage our waste and how we supply our field projects. There are some things we will not be able to change, because we are an emergency organization and our goal is to save lives. We will still need to reach patients and communities in remote locations we will need to bring in essential medical equipment, for that we will use cars and airplanes. We can, however, cut down on all non-essential transport and use different modes of transport instead.

Don't your activities generate a lot of waste? How do you manage that?

Medical activities generate a great deal of waste, including in humanitarian settings. We know that we need to reduce waste and are working on adapting our practices, by rethinking the whole process of how we supply our projects, how we can favor reusable safe options over single use items, how we can recycle more.

We mostly treat the waste generated directly in our project locations. While we aim to so it in the best possible way and to comply with international regulations and directives, this is not always possible because industrial size waste facilities don't exist in the places we work. Where possible, we use semi-industrial equipment, but during emergencies and in unstable contexts, we have to do what we can given the circumstances. Non-toxic combustible waste is incinerated but this is not entirely without negative consequences. We know we still have a long way to go to improve our waste management practices and it very much a priority for us to resolve this.

Does this mean you will become an environmental organization? I support you because you are medical organization.

We remain an emergency medical organization and our priority will always be to deliver health care to those who need it most. We will not change our activities. But knowing the devastating health impacts of unmitigated carbon emissions, we know we cannot continue carrying out these activities the same way as before. We need to adapt, and we need to be as environmentally responsible as possible. As a health actor, we must protect the health and wellbeing of our patients today and tomorrow. We can and should be, more environmentally conscient while conducting our medical humanitarian mission. It is not one or the other.