MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE

The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. It involves the collection and selection of stories of change, produced by programme or project stakeholders. MSC can be used in projects and programmes where it is not possible to precisely predict desired changes beforehand, and is therefore difficult to set pre-defined indicators of change.

The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E). It was first developed in Bangladesh in the 1990s, by Rick Davies. Since then the technique has been widely used by a variety of organisations, especially CSOs. In 2005, a definitive guide to using MSC was developed. That guide is still the most comprehensive guide to using MSC, and is the basis of much of this paper (see Davies and Dart 2005).

MSC involves the collection and selection of stories of change, developed by programme or project stakeholders. It is a participatory technique which relies on engaging stakeholders in a process of discussing, analysing and recording change. MSC can be used in projects and programmes where it is not possible to precisely predict desired changes beforehand, and is therefore difficult to set pre-defined indicators of change.

MSC was developed partly to overcome the perceived weaknesses of more conventional monitoring and evaluation processes that are not always able to deal with complexity (Davies 1996). As with other *'alternative'* methodologies, such as Outcome Mapping, it is often used by CSOs wishing to experiment with methodologies that do not rely on the kind of linear planning encouraged by the logical framework approach.

MSC is normally used as an ongoing monitoring technique, assessing change throughout the lifetime of a programme or project. However, its focus on change (outcome and impact) means it can easily be adapted for use in evaluations as well. According to the author of the technique, MSC is most useful where:
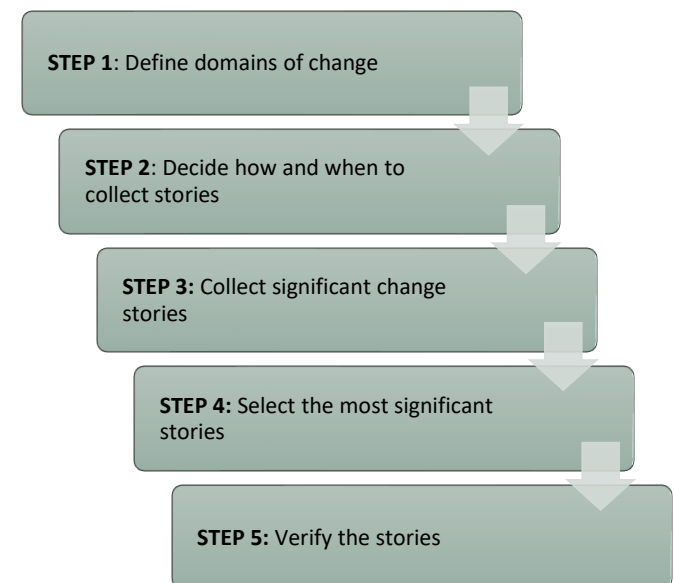
- it is not possible to predict in any detail, or with any certainty, what the outcome of a project or programme will be;
- outcomes vary widely across beneficiaries;
- there is no agreement between stakeholders on which outcomes are the most important; and
- interventions are expected to be highly participatory.

As with any M&E methodology, MSC can be used to help plan future activities. However, it is not a planning tool, and is only normally used within a project or programme once enough time has elapsed for change to have occurred. MSC can be used for accountability purposes, and many donors now consider it a valid methodology. MSC can also help

marketing, fundraising or communications work through generating stories that show changes in people's lives. However, its primary purpose is probably to enable learning, particularly within large or complex programmes focused on social change in areas such as mobilisation and empowerment.

How it works

There are many ways of implementing MSC, depending on the context and type of intervention. The following steps are normally included.

STEP 1: Define domains of change

STEP 2: Decide how and when to collect stories

STEP 3: Collect significant change stories

STEP 4: Select the most significant stories

STEP 5: Verify the stories

STEP ONE

The first task in MSC is normally to introduce a range of stakeholders to the technique, and thereby gain their interest in, and ownership over, the process. Stakeholders may include project or programme staff, staff at other levels of an organisation, targeted beneficiaries and donor representatives, amongst others.

After that the next task is to identify, with stakeholders, some **domains of change** – typically between three and five – that will be monitored (or evaluated). Domains are broad areas where change might be expected to occur. In MSC

they are not precisely defined, but are instead deliberately left open to interpretation.

Domains may be designed to capture change at many different levels, such as individual, community or organisational level. Examples might include:

- changes in the quality of peoples' lives;
- changes in organisational culture; and
- changes in the way villagers interact with each other.

STEP TWO

The next step is to identify **how and when the stories will be collected**. This means deciding on the methods that will be used to identify, record, discuss, select and analyse the stories. In most cases MSC stories are written down, but it is also possible for stories to be recorded as audio or video. If MSC is used as an ongoing monitoring process then it is also important to decide at this stage how often stories will be produced.

Other decisions that might be taken at this stage include the criteria used to select stories, the makeup of the groups that will select stories at different levels, and how the stories will be used by the project or programme. These decisions will often be dependent on the type of project, programme or organisation. A complex programme with many different layers will need different systems and processes than a more straightforward project operating in only a few locations.

STEP THREE

The third step is to **collect the stories of change**. In MSC, stories are normally collected from those stakeholders most directly involved in a project or programme, such as targeted beneficiaries and project or programme staff. At regular intervals (if used for monitoring) stakeholders are asked what have been the most significant changes they have experienced or observed within each domain over the past period. The different stories are then written down (or recorded or videoed) – either by the stakeholders themselves or by other people on their behalf.

In addition to a description of the story, MSC also requires some further information to be recorded for each story. This can include information such as:

- who provided the story;
- when and where the change happened; and
- what the story teller believes is the significance of the events described in the story.

A standard template is often used to record the stories and associated information. This helps ensure that important details are not omitted.

STEP FOUR

The fourth step is to **select the most significant stories of change**. Once the stories have been produced, people read the stories aloud (or listen to the audio or watch the videos) and discuss the value of each story. They then decide which they consider to be the most significant stories of all, within each domain.

In an individual project this may be done in a single location with a single group. More often, however, MSC is implemented in large projects or programmes. In these cases, the most significant stories selected are passed up to the next level. So, for instance, stories developed from several groups within a community could be brought together at the community level. Stories from different communities could be analysed at programme level. And stories from different programmes could be analysed at organisational level (see diagram below).
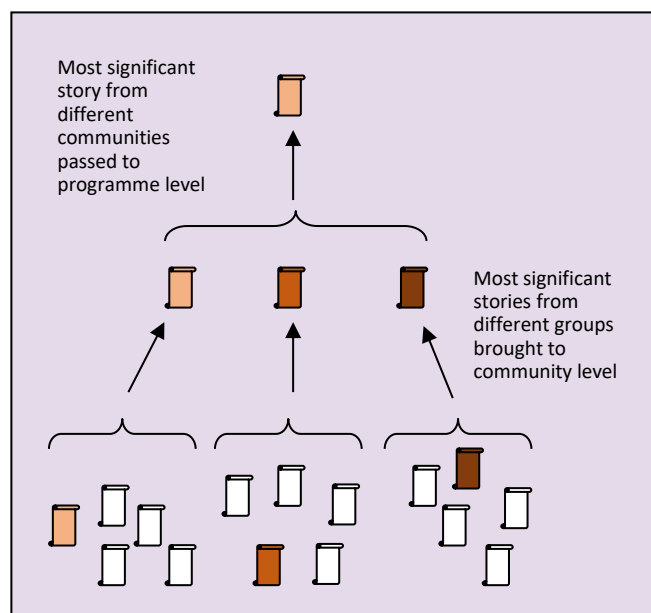
In this way, stories are progressively discussed and analysed at successive levels within a hierarchy. Each level chooses the most significant story in each domain, and then passes them on to the next level. Eventually, a few stories emerge as the most significant of all. These stories, and a statement explaining why they were selected, are then fed back downwards through the hierarchy. Hopefully, this feedback then refines the selection of stories for the next round of data collection.

It is very important that the process used to select the stories is open and transparent, as this is part of what separates MSC from more ad-hoc or subjective methods of identifying stories. So every time stories are selected the criteria used to select them, and an explanation of the decision, should also be recorded and fed back to all interested stakeholders.

STEP FIVE

An essential part of MSC is the **verification of stories** wherever possible. This is important as otherwise stories might be selected that are untrue, misleading or open to different interpretations. So, ideally, all stories should be checked for accuracy before being used or passed on to the next level of the hierarchy. This often

involves talking to different stakeholders to find out their views of the change story.

Sometimes this can be done during the meetings designed to collect and select stories, but sometimes additional work may need to be done. For example, it might be useful to visit the places where described events took place. In some cases, it might also be useful to gather further information to close gaps in the stories or provide better explanations of the changes recorded. Clearly, if the stories do not pass the verification test then they are rejected, and other stories included instead.

Quantification

MSC is a qualitative methodology, and is not normally used to generate quantitative data. In the development community this can sometimes be a challenge as many donors insist on numerical reporting. There are two major ways to overcome this. Firstly, resources permitting, MSC can be used alongside other methodologies that produce quantitative data. Secondly, MSC itself can be used to generate some kinds of quantitative data. There are at least three ways in which this can be done (see Davies and Dart 2005).

- Within individual stories of change it is sometimes possible to report on basic statistical data, such as how many people benefited from a change, and how they benefited (e.g. increased assets or higher nutritional intake).

- Sometimes it is useful to collect together all the stories – including those not chosen to pass on to the next level of the hierarchy – and count how many times a certain kind of change is mentioned.

- Another way of generating numbers is to select the most significant stories in each domain and then ask all other stakeholders involved in the process whether they have observed or experienced similar change. This helps show not only the nature of the most significant change occurring, but also how widespread that change is.

Strengths and weaknesses

There are many reasons why different CSOs find MSC to be extremely useful.

- MSC can be used to monitor and evaluate projects or programmes that do not have predefined outcomes, and cannot therefore be monitored or evaluated using pre-defined indicators. For the same reason, MSC is better equipped to handle unexpected change than many other methodologies.

- MSC is a participatory technique that helps to identify changes in people's lives from their own perspectives. This helps projects and programmes understand how changes are seen through the eyes of different stakeholders.

- MSC encourages analysis as well as data collection. Individuals must explain *why* they believe one change is more important than another. This helps contribute to the learning process.

- MSC requires no special professional skills to develop and administer. Unlike some other methodologies, project and programme staff often feel comfortable experimenting with MSC even if they have no previous experience or training.

However, there are also some weaknesses and limitations that need to be recognised.

- MSC is not designed to access information on predicted, quantifiable indicators, and is therefore less appropriate for capturing expected change across large numbers of stakeholders. In addition, it is not designed to capture information on finance, inputs or activities. This needs to be done through other processes.

- MSC is not designed to provide comprehensive information about the changes brought about through a project or programme. It is not designed to address *typical* change but rather the most *significant* change. This is not a weakness of the technique itself, as MSC is deliberately based around purposeful sampling – selecting the most information rich stories to analyse. However, it does mean that where assessment of *typical* change is needed, MSC needs to be complemented by other methodologies.

- MSC may require considerable resources, and requires different sets of stakeholders to be re-visited at regular intervals. As with any participatory methodology, MSC can be very time-consuming if done properly.

- MSC is not always very good at accessing information on negative changes. However, some organisations have overcome this problem by developing a domain of change that specifically covers negative change.

- As with any tool or methodology there are a few potential biases. These include the bias towards stories of success, bias towards those who are good at telling (or writing) stories, and subjectivity in the story selection process. There are ways to overcome all of these biases, but they need to be recognised if they are to be addressed.

Usage and adaptation

Over the past few years, MSC has become an accepted M&E methodology, particularly amongst the CSO community. It has been used by many different organisations with varying degrees of success.

MSC is quite a flexible technique, and its application depends on the type of development initiative and the nature of the organisation using it. Many CSOs have adapted MSC to their own purposes. In particular, some organisations have looked for innovative ways of soliciting and recording change stories. One example that has generated much recent interest concerns the combination of MSC with participatory video.

INTRAC's view of MSC is that organisations tend to get out what they put in. If MSC is simply treated as an easy way to get stories for donors then it often has little value as a participatory, monitoring exercise. For example, in the past many CSOs have added questions onto reporting forms asking for the *'most significant changes'* that have occurred during a project. This is not real MSC, and the process used to generate these stories of change often lacks the rigour that accompanies the full MSC methodology.

If implemented properly, on the other hand, MSC can be a very resource-intensive exercise, with all the opportunities and challenges associated with participatory methodologies. At its best it can provide an accepted and validated methodology for generating and using purposefully sampled stories of change – something that CSOs have not always been very good at in the past.

Further reading and resources

Other papers in the M&E Universe series dealing with qualitative methodologies for analysing and using multiple stories of change include those on outcome harvesting, Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) and tracer studies. A short list of techniques for purposeful sampling can be found in the paper on sampling.

▶ Outcome harvesting

▶ Qualitative comparative analysis

▶ Tracer studies

▶ Sampling

The key publication on MSC mentioned in this paper is contained in the Davies and Dart (2005) guide, listed in the references. This is available from the www.mande.co.uk website.

References

- Davies, R (1996). *An Evolutionary Approach To Facilitating Organisational Learning: An experiment by the Christian Commission For Development in Bangladesh.* Retrieved from http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/ccdb.htm.
- Davies, R and Dart, J (2005). *The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique: A guide to its use.* April 2005.

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INTRAC

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