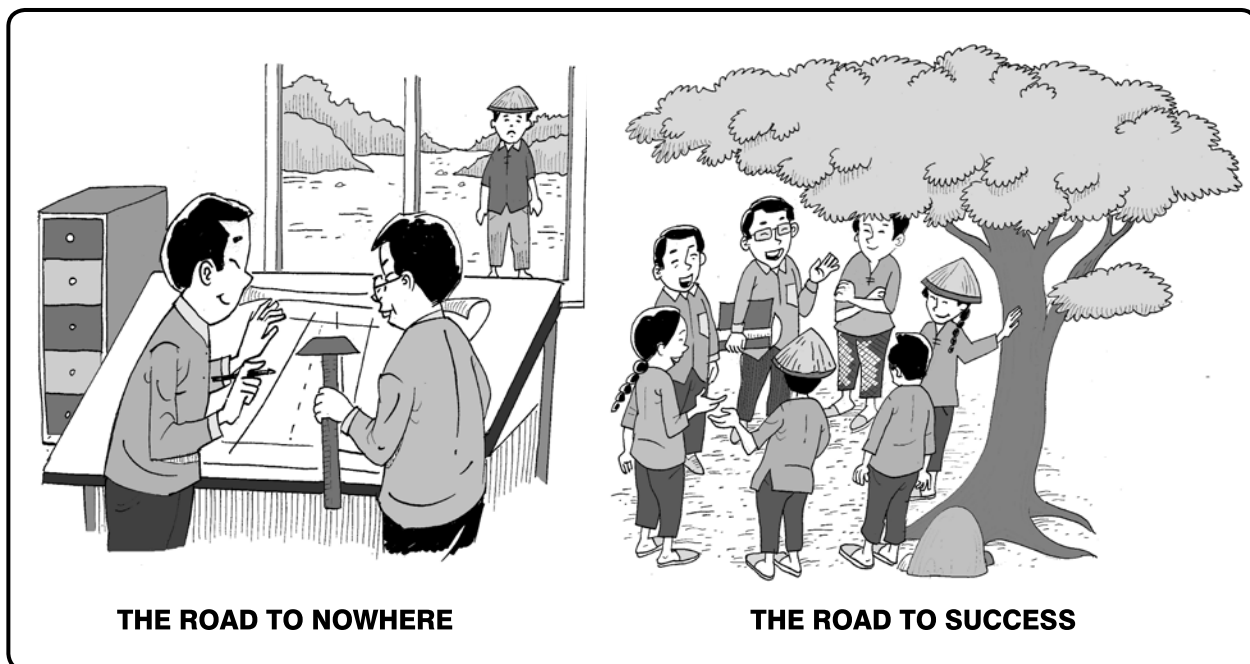


# Piloting Most Significant Change Stories at the Project Completion Report Phase



**T**he final evaluation of a multiyear project provides the opportunity to comprehensively assess the impact of project activities and to extract experiences and lessons that can be disseminated to key stakeholders. Complex multi-intervention projects often rely on detailed quantitative tools to gather data and to present results. Nevertheless, at the project completion report (PCR) preparation phase, it is sometimes necessary to broaden the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) toolkit to get a firm grasp of the results behind the figures. Numbers are very good at indicating outputs (what structures were built, how much it cost, how many people participated in the training, etc.) but, for a more profound understanding of the scope



and value of the outcomes, other tools are more effective. For instance, in addition to measuring how many kilometers of road are built, the project needs to talk to the people to assess how their lives have changed since it was built. Using the most significant change (MSC) stories tool is like starting with something very small—a short individual story—but ending up with something very big—the most important impacts of the project on the target beneficiaries, as experienced by them.

Two IFAD-financed projects in China piloted the use of MSC in their PCRs, the Si'Chuan Post-Earthquake Agriculture Rehabilitation Project (SPEAR) and the South Gansu Poverty Reduction Programme (SGPRP). They explored the application of this qualitative tool alongside their regular M&E activities, which included the RIMS, baseline surveys, and the annual project reviews.

## Most significant change

The MSC technique is a form of participatory M&E, originally developed by Rick Davies (for more information, see <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs>). It is a storytelling tool similar to unstructured interviews, but more informal—like brief conversations. The interviewer tries to find impact indicators by seeking answers to the following questions:

- What was the situation x years ago? What is it like now? What has changed in your life?
- Is the change positive or negative?
- How is the project connected with this change?

Project staff collect the significant change stories at the field level, followed by a systematic analysis of the most interesting or important stories by panels of designated stakeholders or staff. Once the important changes have been captured, various groups of stakeholders read the stories, followed by a joint discussion, about the value of the reported changes and the criteria why they consider them significant.

The application of MSC is very flexible and can be applied at different levels:

- It can be used for periodic monitoring throughout the project cycle as it is a quick and easy tool to apply, and its feedback can be easily integrated at any point in the implementation.
- Used more comprehensively, it can be used for evaluation because it provides conclusions on outcomes and impact and gives a snapshot of the impact of the programme as a whole.
- It can be used for documentation and communication purposes as it provides a series of outputs (stories) that might be of interest for a specific target audience.

It is a very versatile tool that can be administered by interviewers with different skills: project staff, external stakeholders, and even non-standard collection persons (e.g., teenagers talking to their grandparents in the community to check the impact of a newly established care center). Using non-professional interviewers can provide interesting advantages by minimising interviewer bias. Once the stories are compiled, they are weighed to select the most striking stories. The criteria for selecting the stories can vary: for example, stories that are repeating the same theme (looking for trends), stories that are particularly powerful (looking for strong impact) and stories that indicate some surprising unexpected impacts or outline unexpected opportunities (unintended outcomes), etc.

**Table 1. Key steps in the MSC approach.**

<b>FOUR KEY STEPS OF MSC</b>	
<b>Step 1 Preparation and conceptualisation</b>	After an initial review of various tools, MSC was selected as the most appropriate complementary qualitative tool due to its participatory/ interactive features and its ability to bring out subtle expected and unexpected effects. A concept note was developed on using MSC in the PCR phase.
<b>Step 2 Contextualisation</b>	The concept note was discussed with the IFAD China office and with local project offices in order to adjust it to local needs. The length of the training was tailored to the work schedules of the stakeholders and their perceived needs.

## FOUR KEY STEPS OF MSC

<p><b>Step 3 Training</b></p>	<p>Each project had a single training session (lasting 2½ days), with around 30 knowledge management and M&amp;E staff from the provincial and county project management offices. Listening, recording and peer review skills were practiced during the training to improve interviewing competencies. A field visit was organised to help participants gain hands-on experience in applying MSC.</p>
<p><b>Step 4 Next steps/ Replication</b></p>	<p>The training sessions highlighted the need to mainstream qualitative M&amp;E and knowledge management tools in project M&amp;E in China. The roadmap for mainstreaming was developed—i.e., who needs to do what. A proposal was then drafted to organise these trainings, including writeshops to improve the capacity of project staff to document results. An entry point for this training could be the start of planning for the PCR, when project results need to be assessed.</p>

The trainings created an interactive forum, where all participants were free to join and discuss as equals. At the beginning of the training, the facilitators emphasised transparency and equality as the basic values in the training. A group discussion approach was adopted throughout the training. Instead of sitting in rows, which is often done in top-down trainings, participants were invited to arrange their tables in a large circle and/or in small clusters, to best facilitate mobility and interaction.

### Value of training

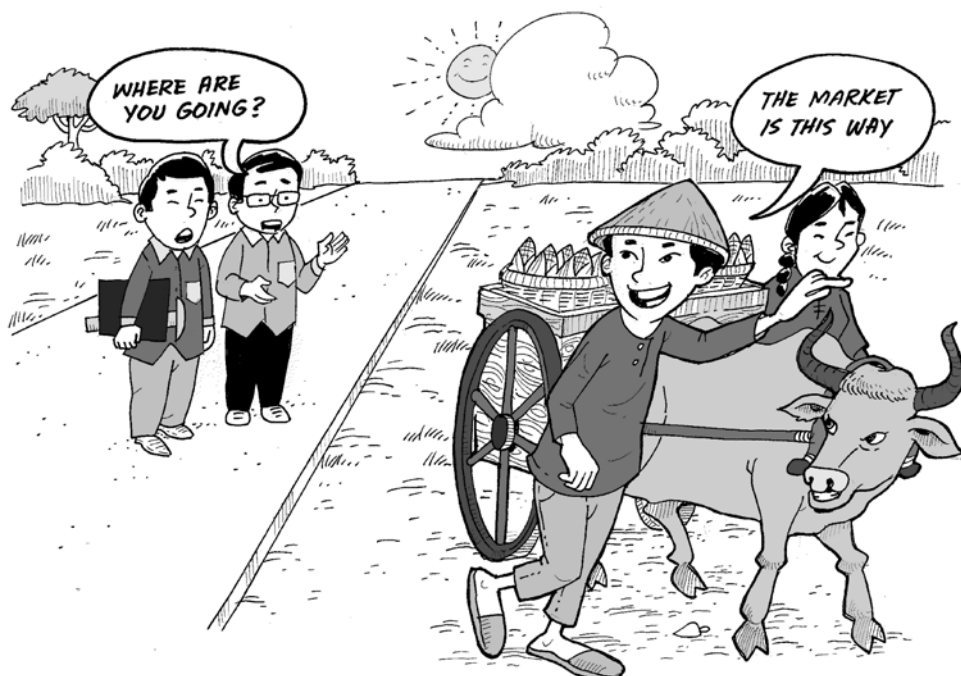
- Improves interviewing skills of the participants; they learn ways of following up to gather more information and verifying the validity of information.
- Presents complementary qualitative M&E methodology, including MSCs and built-in tools/methods.
- Maximises 'learning by doing'. The methodology is first practised several times among the trainers themselves to sharpen their skills and improve subsequent story collection from project beneficiaries.

At the start of the training, expectation management was used to gather the expectations of participants. These were presented and discussed with them openly on how they fit with the objectives of the workshop. Subsequently, the facilitators introduced the adjusted to steps of MSC (Box 1). Due to the limited time available, only the first five steps were practised. The subsequent steps were presented in the follow-up sessions.

Special emphasis was placed on describing, in great detail, the interviewing/listening skills needed for gathering valid and detailed information from the people in the field. The participants were provided with questionnaires to use as guide for their interviews with beneficiary households. To preserve the participatory value of their input, ample space was given to participants at each session, through either a plenary discussion or a group discussion, to reflect on each training tool. It helped introduce a feedback mechanism on the relevance and effectiveness of what they were learning. Practicing these skills is necessary for getting the techniques right. The participants had a chance to collect MSC stories in a safe, guided environment by interviewing each other. Then, on the second day, field work was organised, where the participants had a chance to test what they have learned by interviewing beneficiary households and collecting real-life stories. While they were conducting the informal interviews, the story collectors could rely on the lists of questions as indicative guidelines (see examples in Table 2). They are free to also add or drop questions from the list to better respond to the individual interview context and the beneficiary's situation. On the final day of the training, the participants were invited back to the meeting room. The next stage of the MSC process was practised: the joint discussion and evaluation of the stories to assess their contribution to the analysis of project results.

### **Box 1: Ten Adjusted Steps of MSC**

1. Define reporting period (*SPEAR*, 3 yr; *SGPRP*, 6 yr)
2. Collect significant change stories
3. Define domain of change (cluster) (*Optional*)
4. Select significant change stories (*including defining selection criteria*)
5. Get feedback on choices made
6. Verify
7. Quantify
8. Conduct meta-monitoring + secondary analysis
9. Re-package stories for identified target audience
10. Reset the MSC system



**Table 2. Commonly asked questions during MSC interviews.**

<b>Opening questions</b>	<b>Follow-up questions</b>
Are you aware of IFAD projects?	Are you personally involved in an IFAD project?
Have you experienced any changes brought by the project?	How was the situation in the village before and how is it now after the changes?
Who benefited from the changes?	Who hasn't?
Is the change significant for you?	Is it expected or unexpected?
What would be a significant change for you?	If yes, please specify....
What are the conducive factors?	What are the constraining factors?
What other suggestions do you have?	

**Box 2. A diversity of qualitative M&E and knowledge-sharing methods.**

There are various qualitative M&E and knowledge-sharing methods that can be applied during the MSC, including the after action review (AAR), gallery walk, elevator pitch and spider web. The application of these methods was introduced throughout the training, giving the participants the opportunity to become familiar with these tools.

- The AAR is a structured review or debriefing process for analysing what happened, why it happened, and how it can be done better. It has been built as a knowledge management tool to foster a culture of accountability.
- The gallery walk allows participants to first draft their stories on a flipchart. They present their stories to others within a predefined time period (e.g., 5 min). The audience comments on the presentation and suggest potential areas for improvement.
- The elevator pitch is used to sharpen logic and formulate concise presentations done in a limited time frame. The participants are given 5 minutes in this training to present their projects to senior officials.
- The spider web is a participatory evaluation tool that provides participants with the chance to evaluate an event in its various dimensions. In the MSC training, several dimensions were included: relevance, effectiveness, facilitation/coordination skills and logistical arrangement, among others.

## Lessons learned

- The MSC tool is very valuable for putting numbers in context. For instance, by summarising the most significant stories, SPEAR staff were inspired to think beyond quantity. Initially, they were very focused and satisfied with simply the numbers (e.g., biogas cells built in a short time).
- Stories, however, helped uncover other impacts. The households were thankful for receiving help during their most difficult times. The unintended outcome of this assistance was that the beneficiaries felt empowered and motivated to undertake other initiatives.
- Mainstreaming knowledge management and qualitative M&E can enhance project impacts. It is important to define a roadmap that outlines how mainstreaming will be accomplished and how to engage key stakeholders, especially in the clarification of their respective responsibilities.
- Additional resources, capacity and skills—particularly at the project level—are needed for the broader application (mainstreaming) of this tool in project monitoring. Consultants can help in the process, acting as ‘triggers’ for introducing the concept and exposing trainers to their first experience with this tool. However, for MSC to become an integral part of a project toolbox, the country office needs to take a leading role in developing in-house capacity of all project team members.

## Value added and next steps

### SPEAR

- The visit of the IFAD assessment mission triggered a set of changes in the project’s approach to doing their PCR. They started to look beyond filling out numbers in the report template. The facilitators provided a participatory forum and a platform where key messages from the beneficiaries were summarised and used alongside the quantitative figures. The stories/case studies enriched the content of PCR and helped project stakeholders to analyse their experiences and to draw lessons for possible application to other projects.
- The idea and methodology of collecting stories were new to the team. The hands-on experience, (despite the short time span) helped improve the understanding and appreciation of the value of qualitative data/information and its importance as an integral part of project M&E impacts. (Refer to Box 2 for the range of qualitative M&E and knowledge-sharing tools.)
- In addition to recognising the value of presenting results in numeric terms (e.g., the number of biogas cells built), SPEAR staff could now also see the story behind the biogas cells. SPEAR is ready to share the knowledge and experiences with other stakeholders.

## SGPRP

- The added value of the qualitative approach was an opportunity to provide the provincial Project Management Office with story-based evidence of what they had been doing in their project for some years—gathering impact information through unstructured interviews. The training on MSC provided them with the tools to further systematise their story collection, adding the component of participatory selection and dissemination processes.
- Following the training, they felt that it was possible to integrate the MSC approach throughout the project implementation period and to use this methodology as a periodical and complementary qualitative monitoring tool.
- The participatory methods used in the training, interviewing skills and the experiences of collecting stories directly from the field were relevant to future project activities.

## Acronyms and Abbreviations

<b>AAR</b>	after action review
<b>IFAD</b>	International Fund for Agricultural Development
<b>M&amp;E</b>	monitoring and evaluation
<b>MSC</b>	most significant change stories
<b>PCR</b>	project completion report
<b>RIMS</b>	Results-based impact management system
<b>SGPRP</b>	South Gansu Poverty Reduction Program
<b>SPEAR</b>	Si'Chuan Post-Earthquake Agriculture Rehabilitation Project

## Bio-sketch and contact details

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