

Measuring Change Through Stories



The International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD), with support from the Coopernic Sustainability Fund (CSF) has undertaken a grant-based implementation of Scaling up Micro Irrigation Systems, (SCAMPIS) in three countries. The goal of the programme is to improve agricultural productivity and reduce water use through the use of micro irrigation systems (MIS) and a fertigation (liquid organic fertilizer) system. In 2012, to complement its quantitative data collection, the International Development Enterprises India (IDEI) SCAMPIS project introduced an innovative monitoring and evaluation (M&E) methodology, the Most Significant Change (MSC) tool, in India and Guatemala. It sought to maximise the possibilities for learning from beneficiaries by uncovering the hidden factors or dynamics (not revealed by quantitative M&E tools) that contribute to project success or failure.

What is the MSC Tool?

The MSC technique is a form of participatory M&E. It is considered participatory because many project stakeholders are involved in the collection and analysis of significant change stories. It is a form of monitoring because it can be used throughout the programme cycle to provide valuable information for improving project implementation. The tool contributes to evaluation because it provides data regarding impact and outcomes, which can be used to assess the performance of the programme as a whole. It contributes to strengthening organisational learning and communication through the analysis process, when staff come together to discuss the changes—i.e., answering the question 'what went wrong?' The information collected and analysed through MSC stories helps improve project impact by supplementing the quantitative M&E analysis; it provides a more complete understanding of what is happening in the field. It also provides a very useful tool to help explain the project goals to farmers (can be used as knowledge management material) or to clarify implementation bottlenecks to staff members.

Why collect stories?

- People tell stories naturally, and storytelling is part of the indigenous culture.
- Stories can capture complexity and context very clearly.
- People remember stories.
- Stories can transmit hard messages and sensitive topics.
- Stories should be carefully analysed for biases: they are subjective and are often colored by the interviewer's and the interviewee's views.

How the MSC technique was introduced and used

Goals of using MSC

- Better understand the M&E qualitative data
- Learn about the farmers' perception of the project or the technologies introduced
- Fill in the gaps between reality in the field and management or donor expectations
- Involve all staff in a coherent process of discussion and reflection on the work conducted

This qualitative tool has four levels of analysis: baseline model, outputs (simple indicator), outcomes (complex indicator) and inputs (or possible impacts inferred). After the first year of analysis, and the interesting qualitative results from the Results and Impact Management System (RIMS) survey, the MSC tool was introduced as a method to complement the analysis because of its several key advantages.

- Qualitative data can be collected. SCAMPIS is not just numbers and technologies; it seeks to change the lives of its beneficiaries.
- M&E data could be connected to the perceived real-life impact on different stakeholders in the field.
- The experiences from the three implementation countries could be recorded and compared.
- The project management unit can learn about people at different levels.

First, a training of trainers (ToT) was conducted, led by external facilitators and attended by key project staff and stakeholders from partner organisations and agencies. After completion of the training, village meetings were organised to identify user-farmers and youth who could be trained to conduct the interviews. Their identification and training were critical as local stakeholders were to take the lead in executing MSC activities. The team talked with the user-farmers and explained the MSC tool and its purpose. As a result, many farmers volunteered to share their experiences on various aspects (degree of mobilisation, success in adopting the micro-irrigation technologies and the benefits they got).

Following this strong expression of interest by the farmers, a detailed plan for training of youth interviewers was made. Five training sessions for village youth were conducted by the project staff and others trained during the ToT. The youth were trained on different aspects, including conducting interviews, making videos, taking still photos, developing storyboards, interacting with project beneficiaries, facilitating focus group discussions as well as observing and documenting the process. At the end of the training, each person was asked if he or she had understood the roles and responsibilities, and any doubts were clarified. A total of 24 youth (18 young men and 6 young women) were trained. During the training, the participants discussed the similarities and differences between qualitative M&E and MSC, the principles of MSC and the importance of recording stories carefully. There was an opportunity to practice their story collection and analysis skills. This also helped clarify the roles of the various stakeholders.

Feedback from youth MSC interviewers

Soon after my training, I was worried how I would do the interview, what I will say. But when I actually interacted with the farmers, I was very surprised to hear them talk so much. I was also delighted to hear from the farmers who benefited from the project, when they told us about their increased income and how they felt a sense of social dignity. I learned a lot about M&E; it helped me understand the community and appreciate the impact of the development interventions.

Collection of stories

All of the stories were collected by the 24 local youth (13–16 years old) who had participated in the one-day training. Using a variety of skills (reporting, film making and photography), they conducted interviews with 25 user farmers (23 male and 2 female) across 13 villages in Koraput and Gajapati districts. Everybody liked the idea of involving the local youth because it was felt that they could understand the local environment better and would not miss subtle nuances in meaning (thus reducing the loss of information).

Why young people?

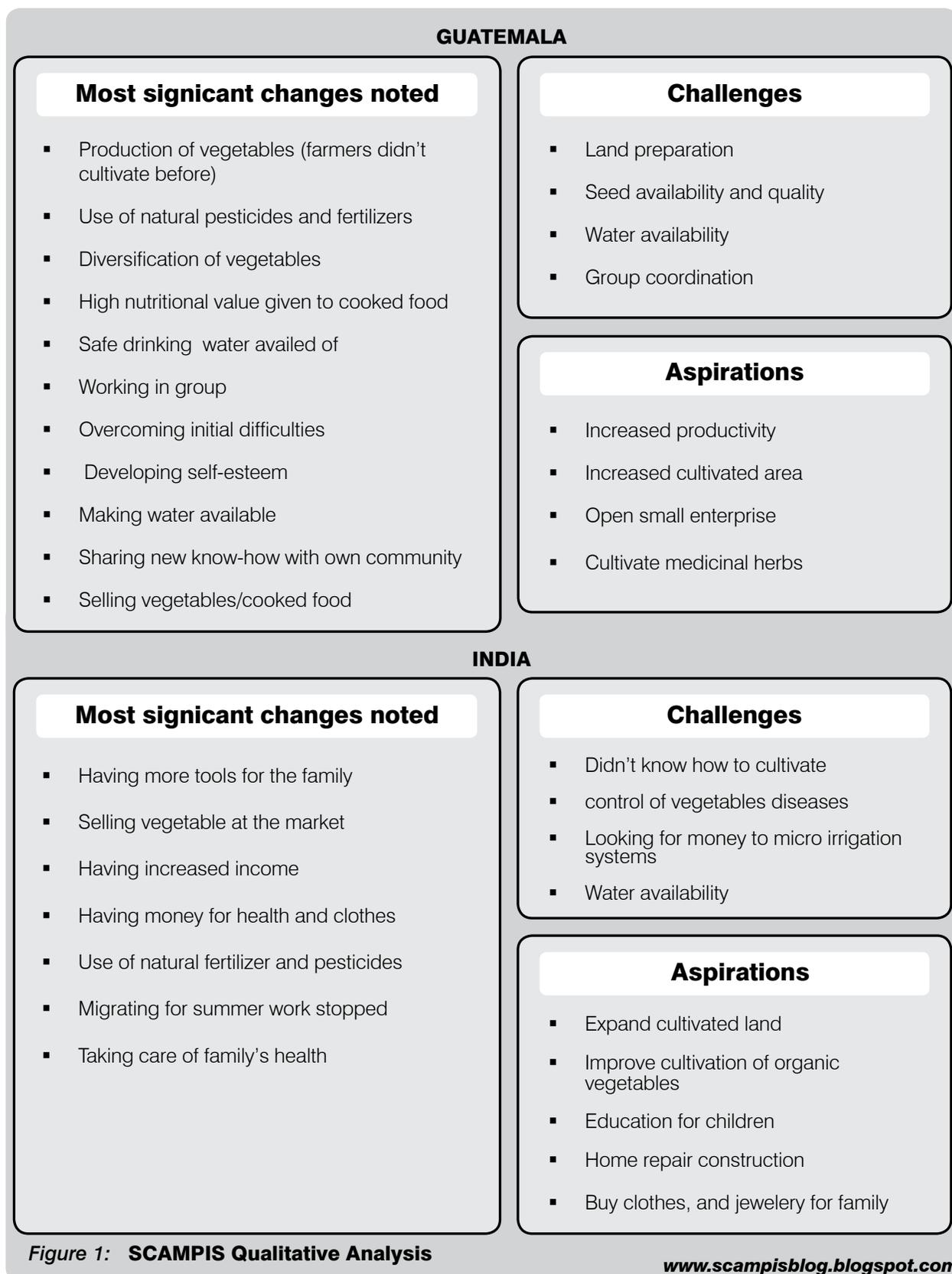
- They are curious and they naturally tend to ask follow-up questions to get a better understanding of the responses.
- They are interested and able to learn the technique quite quickly.
- The interviewees feel more comfortable to share their views with the youth (for example, if a woman smallholder speaks to an older male interviewer, she may not be at ease to share the full extent of her opinions).
- They are more prone to listen carefully and not introduce their own views (thus minimising interviewer bias).
- By participating in the survey, the youth build their self-confidence and their self-image as productive members of the community.

Analysis of cases

The collected stories were discussed and reflected upon in groups. The analysis followed six steps:

- Step 1. After each analysis, an overview of the findings was discussed within the group.
- Step 2. During the first analysis of stories, the staff selected the '10 best' MSC stories.
- Step 3. During the second analysis, six stories were chosen as most representative among the 10.
- Step 4. These selected stories were video-taped, translated and the subtitles added.
- Step 5. After the analysis at the national level, a cross-country analysis was undertaken (Guatemalan national staff analysed the Indian cases and vice versa).
- Step 6. All the stories were collected at the IFAD HQ level for final evaluation and connection to M&E data.

Main findings from applying MSC in Guatemala and India



Sample guide questions for interviewers

1. What is your name?
2. Where are you from?
3. How many are in your family? How many sons and daughters do you have?
4. When did you start using the SCAMPIS-introduced technology? Where did you see it for the first time? What did you think of it at the beginning? What technology do you use?
5. Is there any technology used by the women farmers of your family? What type of technology do they use?
6. Are any women farmers involved in the preparation of liquid organic fertilisers?
7. Do you cultivate and take care of the plot alone? Does someone help you? Who?
8. What have you harvested since you started using the technique? How much?
9. Did you cultivate vegetables before having access to the technologies? If the answer is yes, ask: Do you see any difference? If the answer is no, ask: Why?
10. Is this the main source of income for your family? Have you sold some of the vegetables produced with MIS? What did you do with the money from the sale?
11. How was the project before and how is it now? Which are the most significant changes that you have seen? Why are these changes important?

Levels of analysis

Once all the interviews were completed and the videos recorded, the materials were translated into English. During IDEI's monthly SCAMPIS staff meeting at the India site, the team invited people from other NGOs, the Odisha Tribal Empowerment and Livelihoods Programme (OTELP), business associates and senior marketing officers of SCAMPIS IDEI who attended the ToT to analyse all stories and select the 10 best stories. This was the first level of analysis.

Keeping the guidelines in mind, the second-level analysis involved senior representatives from the key stakeholders mentioned above. They were invited to further analyse the 10 stories and to further narrow down the selection to six stories. Each participant filled out an MSC analysis sheet, outlining his or her individual preference, which was followed by a discussion and collective decisionmaking to select the six most representative cases.

Strengths of MSC

- **Organisational development and learning:** It improves dialogue, trust and democratic deliberation. It can fill the gaps between perceptions of project management and senior staff and the reality on the ground.
- **Project implementation:** If expected results are not met with MSC, the staff can uncover shortcomings quickly and modify the approach accordingly.
- **M&E:** It improves understanding and contextualises quantitative M&E.
- **Effectiveness:** It directly involves project beneficiaries in improving project effectiveness.
- **Communication:** It improves internal and external communication.
- **Sustainability:** It can be easily implemented and managed by communities and staff.
- **Evaluation:** It can be used for ex-post evaluation.

Lessons learned

The overall experience of participating in MSC training and using the tool was very encouraging for all involved. The youth had never before been directly involved in a similar monitoring exercise, so there was some scepticism; however, during the meetings with the local youth and farmers, strong enthusiasm was noted. During the training the youth were motivated and keen to learn, and they undertook their tasks in a professional manner. MSC is a useful technique that helped capture the qualitative aspects of project impact. It not only helped the project to go beyond numbers; it helped achieve better analysis/cross-analysis. It provided deeper insights into the 'real' impact of work.

MSC is suitable for M&E that focuses on learning rather than just accountability. It is an appropriate tool for including the views of non-professional contributors in the assessment of the intervention. MSC also helps staff improve their capacity to capture and analyse the impact of their work.

Limitations of MSC

MSC also had some limitations. It seems to be best suited as a complementary tool to the use of quantitative assessment tools. As a standalone M&E exercise it can provide only illustrative information, not grounded in a clear context of actions and impacts. The inclusion of a larger number of cases could have helped do better cross-analysis at the local level. Trained staff have since left the project, and it is important to ensure access to this capacity to understand MSC studies.

Web references

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Acronyms and abbreviations

BK	bucket kit
CSF	Coopernic Sustainability Fund
DK	drum kit
IDEI	International Development Enterprises (India)
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
KM	knowledge management
KS	knowledge sharing

LOF	liquid organic fertilizers
M&E	monitoring & evaluation
MIS	micro irrigation systems
MSC	most significant change
NGO	nongovernment organisation
OTELP	Odisha Tribal Empowerment and Livelihoods Programme
RBM	result-based management
SCAMPIS	Scaling up Micro Irrigation Systems
STP	surface treadle pump

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Born in a farming family, he was the first person in the family to complete post graduation. IDEI in Odisha provided a good platform for further professional development. As the first paid field staff of IDEI, he benefited from working extensively with scores of marginalised and smallholder farmers, across different states in India. The focus was on providing access to potable water, reducing menial physical labour and promoting sustainable farming practices. He draws strength from the hardworking smallholders of rural India, particularly those living in the most backward areas of rural Odisha.