

Most Significant Change Stories to Capture Achievements and Lessons



The Most Significant Change (MSC)¹ technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E). It is participatory because many project stakeholders are involved, both in deciding the sorts of change to be recorded and in analysing the data. MSC may be used at different levels.

- It can be used as a form of monitoring because it can occur throughout the programme cycle and provide information to help people manage the programme.

¹ The MSC technique was invented by Rick Davies in an attempt to meet some of the challenges associated with monitoring and evaluating a complex participatory rural development program in Bangladesh, which had diversity in both implementation and outcomes.

- It can contribute to an evaluation need because it provides data on outcomes and impact of relevance to programme performance and lessons.
- It can be used for documentation and communication purposes because it provides a series of outputs (stories) that might be of interest to a specifically identified target audience.

The process involves the collection of stories emanating from the field and the systematic selection of the most significant of these stories by panels of designated stakeholders or staff. Once changes have been captured, various people sit down together, read the stories and have a discussion about the value of these reported changes against a defined set of criteria. These can be predefined or finalised in the course of the discussion. The first one might be more structured, the second more focused. The selection panel arrives at a consensus of why they consider them significant. When the technique is implemented well, whole teams of people begin to focus their attention on programme outcomes and impact.

What it is all about

A central question about change is posed and the answers to this are often in the form of stories of who did what, when and why—and the reasons for considering the event important. The stories are collected by finding out what people think has changed over a certain period of time. In addition, respondents are encouraged to report why they consider a particular change to be the most significant. Significant change stories are collected from those directly involved, such as participants, stakeholders and field staff.

MSC key question

The core of the MSC process is a question along the lines of: *'Looking back over the last month, what do you think was the most significant change in [particular domain of change]?'*
A similar question is posed when the answers to the first question are examined by another group of participants: *'From among all these significant changes, what do you think was the most significant change of all?'*

When to use MSC

MSC is suited to monitoring efforts that focus on learning rather than just accountability. It is also an appropriate tool when one is interested in the effect of the intervention on people's lives and one is keen to include the words of non-professionals. MSC is used for some of the following reasons:

- Understand stakeholders' and target groups' perspectives on project activities/outputs, including intended and unintended effects
- Assess relationships and complexities in outcomes that cannot be easily captured in numbers
- Encourage analysis during data collection: people have to explain why they believe one change is more important than another—this ensures immediate feedback loops from the M&E system data collection
- Promote learning mechanisms and affirm key lessons
- Provide communication products to present *what we are achieving to a broad range of stakeholders and partners*

While MSC can be used to address the following, there may be other less time-consuming ways to achieve the same objectives:

- capture expected change
- develop good news stories for public relations
- conduct retrospective evaluation of a programme that is complete
- understand the average experience of participants
- produce an evaluation report for accountability purposes

Some of the key enablers for MSC are:

- an organisational culture where it is acceptable to discuss things that go wrong as well as success
- champions (i.e., people who can promote the use of MSC) with good facilitation skills
- a willingness to try something different
- time to run several cycles of the approach
- infrastructure to enable regular feedback of the results to stakeholders
- commitment by senior managers

The MSC method

- **Setting the stage and key parameters**

- ♦ Introduce stakeholders to MSC and foster interest and commitment to participate.
- ♦ Identify the domains of change to be monitored. This involves selected stakeholders identifying broad domains—for example, ‘changes in people’s lives’—that are not precisely defined like performance indicators but are deliberately left loose to be defined by the actual users.
- ♦ Decide how frequently to monitor changes taking place in these domains.

- **Collecting stories**

Most MSC stories are usually a page or less in length, with some being up to two pages. It is important to capture sufficient detail. People who tell MSC stories often assume that other people reading their stories will have all the background knowledge. Watch for assumptions about background knowledge and try to make it more explicit. Refer to box on the next page for information to be collected.

- **Selecting stories and giving feedback**

Members of a selection panel need to be identified and set up. The selection panel should go through these steps:

- ♦ Everybody reads the stories.

- ◆ The group holds an in-depth conversation about the stories.
- ◆ The group decides which stories are felt to be most significant.
- ◆ The reasons for the group's choice(s) are documented.
- ◆ Feedback is provided to those who collected stories.

▪ **Verification of stories**

- ◆ Aims to improve accuracy of reporting as well as to gather more information on what is seen as especially significant
- ◆ Best done by visiting the sites where the described events took place and asking questions not only of the provider of the story but with those around him or her
- ◆ If conducted sometime after the event, a visit also offers a chance to see what has happened since the “event” was first documented
- ◆ To reduce costs, only selected stories could be verified

▪ **Use of stories**

- ◆ Final products can be used with quantitative data for:
 - Communications
 - Annual Reports
- ◆ To feed review events with government, partners and donors
- ◆ To demonstrate what lessons are being learned
- ◆ To prove the viability of project activities for future replication

Selected stories can be presented in many formats, including videos, pictures, booklets, etc. They can be published in reports and in the web to show partners and stakeholders what we are doing.

This can require involving communications people, following up to fill gaps in the stories and taking video, photos and recording interviews.

Information to be documented

1. Information about who collected the story and when the events occurred
2. Description of the story itself—i.e., what happened. In the description of the change identified as the most significant, one should include factual information on who was involved, what happened, where and when. Where possible, a story should be written as a simple narrative describing the sequence of events that took place.
3. Significance (to the storyteller) of events described in the story. The storyteller is also asked to explain the significance of the story from their point of view.

The collection of MSCs is strongly based on open-ended questions. These enable one

- to find out from people what is important to them and
- to gather information on things that one may not have thought to ask “I have an indicator that we measure...”.

Information from open ended questions are more difficult and time-consuming to analyse and synthesise. MSC can help address some of those limitations.

MSC in the IFAD project completion reporting (PCR) process

Rationale for choosing MSC

There are several reasons the MSC may be of value to IFAD PCR, including the following:

- It is a complementary methodology that strengthens the objective indicator-based M&E system.
- It focuses on learning (rather than just accountability) and may be used to identify key lessons and to guide drafting of recommendations.
- It is a good means of identifying and capturing unexpected changes and can be used to monitor and evaluate bottom-up initiatives.
- It can help in understanding current outcomes and guiding the desired future impact.
- It can deliver a rich picture of what is happening rather than an overly simplified one.
- It is a good way to clearly identify the values that prevail in the project and to have a practical discussion about which of those values are the most important.
- It encourages analysis as well as data collection because people have to explain why they believe one change is more important than another.
- It has value not only for the outputs (stories) it produces but also for the process of collecting the stories itself. The participatory approach to determine factors of significance is also of special importance.
- Its outputs (stories) are a very powerful means for communication since people respond well to stories. This is therefore a good way of sharing knowledge with a specifically identified target audience.

Steps in using MSC

Below are the steps on how MSC was used in two selected projects:

1. Defining the key questions with the implementation team. This will require checking how useful the term 'change' is in the given context and accordingly adjusting the concept and philosophy of the MSC methodology to ensure it has meaning to the people involved.
2. Defining and agreeing on how to document the stories.
3. Preparation of stories of most significant change based on stakeholders' and project team members' experiences.
4. Sharing of stories with a defined group of people, including some 'outsiders' and discussing these in a focus group or fishbowl exercise.
5. Recording further elaborations, explanations and illustration of these stories as discussions proceed.
6. Documenting additional stories that arise during the discussion.

References

<http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf>

<http://www.kstoolkit.org/Most+Significant+Change>

http://www.learningtolearn.sa.edu.au/learning_workroom/pages/default/msc/?reFlag=1

This approach was used in other IFAD-funded projects (see Scampis project in India, Madagascar and Guatemala).

Adapted from Tawfiq El Zabri, IFAD M&E Workshop, Kandy, Sri Lanka, 21st July 2012 and Tonya Schuetz, IFAD Consultancy, China, November 2012.

Acronyms and abbreviations

IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
MSC	most significant change
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
PCR	project completion report
SC	significant change

Bio-sketch and contact details

Tonya Schuetz has 12 years' experience in change management, personnel development and capacity building: 5 years in the private sector focusing on cost savings, process analysis and optimization, and 7 years in research for development. She has worked in more than 20 countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia with substantial field experience in project and programme coordination across a range of sectors, including agriculture, water, health and education. Her experience includes knowledge and quality management, monitoring and evaluation, project/program design and conceptualisation of adult learning. Tonya is a multi-faceted result-oriented research coordinator and facilitator. She can be reached by email at schuetztonya@gmail.com.