



# Most Significant Change (MSC)

MSC was developed by Rick Davies in the early 1990's, primarily to address the problem of 'how to summarise & report progress when there is a diversity of activities, not all known in advance, let alone their outcomes and a need to respect people's judgements of what is important to them.'

## WHAT IS IT?

- MSC is about talking to people and finding out what they think has changed
- The periodic collection of 'stories' during a project, that describe changes that have taken place since the project began
- The original methodology includes categorization of change stories and a process of selection of the most significant changes from all the stories gathered
- An abridged version can be done, without categorizing the change stories or selecting one story that is outstanding

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## ADVANTAGES

- MSC includes a wide range of project participants in the monitoring process
- It involves beneficiaries in the analysis of impact and change
- It can easily be built into existing field activities, with minimal additional costs
- Captures both positive and negative change
- Information can be analysed by all participants, not simply by researchers or an evaluation unit

- MSC encourages regular discussions and communication between researchers and beneficiaries fostering an on-going re-evaluation of what really contributes to impact in a project

## THE MSC PROCESS<sup>1</sup>

- Step 1.** Define areas in which change might have occurred (optional)
- Step 2.** Gather 'change' stories from stakeholders
- Step 3.** Review change stories
- Step 4.** Selection of the 'most significant' change story by project staff, donors or by stakeholders (optional)
- Step 5.** Providing feedback to stakeholders about stories selected and the review process
- Step 6.** Verifying and quantifying stories where necessary
- Step 7.** Stories can be used as part of communication process

## HOW CAN IT BE USED FOR M&E?

- Identification of unexpected changes
- Change stories may be negative as well as positive, alerting the researcher to unanticipated effects of the project
- It should be applied alongside indicator based systems - not as a stand-alone method
- The regular discussion between researchers and beneficiaries encourages on going re-evaluation

## RISKS AND CONSTRAINTS

- When collecting significant change stories in local languages, translation requires a culturally sensitive and capable translator

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Davies (2005)

- Respondents may not immediately identify any change that has taken place, even where change has occurred
- Questions need to be precise and easy to understand
- Defining an area of change helps to guide responses in a certain area, but some changes might not be captured
- If the full methodology is applied, selection bias may lean towards the most well-written stories, rather than the most significant change
- It is difficult to compare and evaluate the importance of individual stories

## EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD:

When gathering MSC stories in Bangladesh, we found that we were most likely to hear about change when we were having an informal conversation with project participants.

When we held ‘formal’ interviews to discuss change in one village, we were told that fish production has increased. Yet in a casual conversation with a group of women earlier that day, we had heard that community solidarity has increased and that incomes are more stable. These are important changes. One way to document changes like these is to ask questions about one particular change you have heard about.

For example, to record a story on community solidarity you might ask:

- Can you give an example of a time when the community worked together during the project?
- Who was involved?
- How were things done before you began to work together?
- Did something happen that made you start to work together?
- Why is community solidarity important to you?
- How are things different now than before?

(Natasja Sheriff, WorldFish Center)

## RESOURCES NEEDED

- Very few resources are needed, especially if an abridged version is applied
- Drawing stories from respondents requires a skilled listener and interviewer, with a real interest in learning about change from different stakeholders
- MSC is a deceptively simple process, sufficient time and resources should be allocated to properly train field staff in effective interviewing and story collection
- Resources (human and financial) may be needed for collecting the stories in the field and setting up an evaluation process and network, although the process can easily be built into existing field activities

## REFERENCES

- Davies, R. (1996) An evolutionary approach to facilitating organisational learning: An experiment by the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh. Online at <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. Online at <http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.htm> MSC Discussion Group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mostsignificantchanges>

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