

Clear Horizon

The Most Significant Change Technique



Design. Evaluate. Evolve.

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About these workshop notes

This is a working document which consists of material gathered and prepared to support training in the Most Significant Change Technique (MSC). This is not a stand alone manual on how to do MSC. All rights are reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means whatsoever, without the permission of the copyright owner. Apply in writing to the author:

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Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction to the Most Significant Change technique

In this section:

- Overview of MSC
- Key elements of the MSC process
- Exercise: Osi Tanata Case Study

Overview of MSC

Form of qualitative, participatory monitoring and evaluation

MSC is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. It is participatory because many project stakeholders are involved both in deciding the sorts of change to be recorded and in analysing the data. It is a form of monitoring because it can occur throughout the program cycle and provides information to help people manage the program. It contributes to evaluation because it provides data on impact and outcomes that can be used to help assess the performance of the program as a whole.

Not a standalone approach to monitoring and evaluation

Whilst MSC is a very powerful tool, it is not used as a stand alone tool for monitoring and evaluation for accountability purposes. It is best seen as a very powerful supplementary tool for accountability based systems.

No indicators are used

Unlike conventional approaches to monitoring, the MSC approach does not employ quantitative indicators, and, because of this, is sometimes referred to as 'monitoring without indicators'.

Developed by Davies in 1996

The Most Significant Change technique, or MSC, was originally developed by Rick Davies through his work with a savings and credit project in Bangladesh in 1994 (Davies, 1996). The process was later tested in an Australian by Jess Dart (Dart, 1999) as part of her PH. In 2005 Rick and Jess collaborated and wrote the MSC User Guide which is now translated into 12 different languages.

Now used in many sectors

MSC is now widely used in the international development sector. It can also be found across most Government sectors in Australia and New Zealand including agricultural extension, education, and community health. It is used by small community groups to large corporate organisations. There is an active email group with about 800 members.

Key elements of the MSC process

- Collect stories of change
- Review and select stories
- Feedback and communicate the results

Essentially, the process involves the collection of significant change (SC) stories emanating from the field level, and the systematic selection of the most significant of these stories by panels of designated stakeholders or staff. The designated staff and stakeholders are initially involved by 'searching' for project impact. Once changes have been captured, various people sit down together, read the stories aloud and have in-depth discussions about the value of these reported changes. When the technique is implemented successfully, whole teams of people begin to focus their attention on program impact, learning occurs through discussion and areas for improvement can be identified.



Why stories?

- people tell stories naturally - indigenous
- stories can deal with complexity and context
- people remember stories
- stories can carry hard messages /undiscussables
- stories provide a 'rich picture'
- stories provide a real basis for discussion.

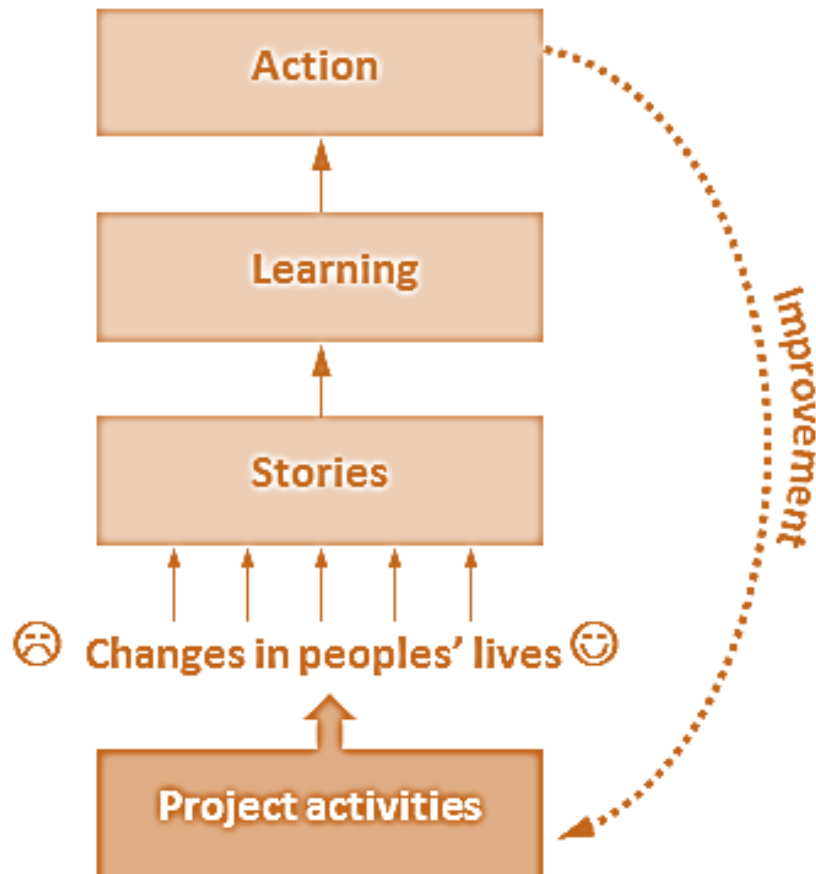


So, in MSC, the stories provide:

- information about project impact
- information about what impacts are valued.



The MSC Learning Loop





Case study exercise – Osi Tanata

- Osi Tanata – Non-government organisation based in Arawa – Bougainville
- Formerly Oxfam New Zealand Program
- 8 staff
- Community development and training: 99 income generation projects –
- Main aims - reconciliation and reconstruction
- 2004 began to use MSC.

How the stories were collected

Staff and the evaluator conducted interviews with community participants around the following question:

“Looking back over the last few months, in your opinion, what do you think was the most significant change that took place as a result of the training/support provided by Osi Tanata project?”

“From among all these significant changes, what do you think was the most significant change of all?”

- The respondent (community member, etc. answers)
- Some collected by external evaluator some by staff
- Often done under a tree after a visit

Exercise: Negotiated selection process

Imagine you are members of the board of Osi Tanata. Select the story you consider to be most significant. Follow the steps below:

- One person to read story 1 aloud
- After listening to the story, discuss the key points and main outcomes in the story
- Repeat for stories 2 & 3

After you have heard all three stories:

- Individually think about which story you consider the most significant and why
- Share your choice and reasons with your group
- Try to reach a consensus in your group on one story
- Be prepared to feedback your selection and reasons

1 Significant Change Story – Osi Tanata

Consent given to use this story	Yes
Name of storyteller	SK
Name of person recording story	Staff member
Title of story:	“Growing big”

I used to be a member of a community project. But I left the community project in anticipation of disputes that might occur within the community project. However, upon hearing that Osi Tanata was giving training to grass roots, I attended some of the Osi Tanata training of project management and book keeping and train the trainer.

After the training I went back to my village and mobilised my family members to venture into organic gardening. I decided to set up my own family project on organic gardening. Despite not having funding from any agency I ventured into setting up this small project with only the knowledge that I got from Osi Tanata. We set up our organic garden growing cabbages, capsicums, greens, tomatoes, aibika, chillies and other things.

Currently I am thankful for what I learned from Osi Tanata, and am using it. Today my project is progressing well. We have sold many of the produce from our organic farm. For example, for a bed of cabbage, I am getting around 100 Kina. Now we have spent the money to buy clothes and many other basic needs. Apart from generating income for our families and the surrounding villages; we have enough surplus to feed our family and others. Also some of the money is being used to start other projects such as a trade store.

It is significant to me because at first I had no knowledge to run a project. Today I have a good project running and the income from this project is being used to sustain the livelihood of my family.

#2 Significant Change Story- Osi Tanata

Consent given to use this story	Yes
Name of storyteller	CP
Name of person recording story	External Evaluator
Title of story?	"We are developing now"

I did the train the trainer, book keeping, and some training on raising poultry (only through Oxfam).

There have been very big changes – we are developing now.

The community poultry project has been operating for about 3 years now. We now have 2 vacancies for women to take on this project as I have come to work at the mission station. The chickens' are good and healthy – people know the chickens are good quality and they come to buy them from the road – we are going to put a sign up. We do it all ourselves now, the money from selling the chickens is used to buy stock feed. We have had about 8 rounds of chickens now.

We have generated a pool of money – 2,000 Kina – that people can borrow from. They borrow money for school fees and things and pay back in instalments. People use this to pay for school fees. I think there are about 20 families who have loans. (From different factions) .They pay an extra 10% back into the fund.

We want to help each other – we have an aim to develop ourselves. We are getting help; this money is being used to help our children and the widows in the community. We teach them how to feed the small chickens. Those who are looking after the chickens get paid 50 Kina when the batch of chicken's are sold. Now several families have set up family chicken projects – we taught them how to do it – even some boys are doing it. There are about 4 families with chickens of their own – they have about 50 chickens.

Families in the community are coming up – they are wearing better clothes and they are healthy and the children are in school. We have one woman in grade 7. Before the project many children were not going to school – now they are more interested.

Now people are eating quality chickens and getting protein, and I think this project will go on helping the community.

#3 Significant Change Story– Osi Tanata

Consent given to use this story Yes
Name of Storyteller: AO, Community member
Name of Person recording story: Staff member
Title: **BUILDING PEACE**

I began to be involved with Osi Tanata in 2001 when I came to attend a weeks training of Community Instructors Training (CIT) hosted by Oxfam. Before I came in for the training I had anticipated starting a piggery project. Also at that time the young men in my community were still very much BRA supporters, and I needed to do something constructive to get their hearts to soften and to busy their hands before we leaders started to talk about peace and reconciliation.

After the CIT course, I put together a proposal for a Chainsaw project and in which ONZBP funded as a community activity. We started very slowly, but because the group was determined to make a go of it, it suddenly fell in place and so the work became known and requests started to flow in from neighbouring villages.

The group was first involved in cutting timber and erected a permanent house for Bartholomew, their new team leader, followed with the construction of classroom for the Community School. Cutting timber for another community was undertaken by the project as well as for our community. Osi Tanata helped us to sow the seeds of peace within ourselves and extend that peace to other neighbouring villages.

This project is not only extending its services to a broader and wider community groups but is extending its goodwill, peace, trust and friendship to its recipient communities. The benefits are trickling further with peace building.

I see Osi Tanata as an organisation that has assisted us to foster the peace process in our community and has strengthened the relationships we hold with other communities. The chainsaw project has been a tool that has assisted to pave the way for peace and reconciliation between the 2 neighbouring communities. It has brought back trust and friendship between my community and the XX community.

Story chosen as most significant

Story:

Reasons for selection:

Reflections on the Osi Tanata case study

Selection is a key tool of MSC!

- People don't like it necessarily
- It puts people out of their comfort zone
- It's a technique to get people to enter into deeper level of dialogue
- Its ensures people to really read the stories
- But its not about the choice - it's about the dialogue! It's about surfacing values.



The stories were reviewed and selected by:

- The Osi Tanata Staff and stakeholders (every 6 months)
- The Osi Tanata Board, and Oxfam New Zealand (every year)

Domains

- Changes at the individual level
- Changes at the community level
- Any other changes
- Lessons learnt

How they conducted feedback to the community

- Feedback to community where possible was via mouth and through representatives
- Feedback to the funders was via 6-monthly reports, and the selected stories were included in the final evaluation along with the reasons for selection. Ideally it allows a slow but continual dialogue between staff, funders and community

Other processes

- A database was developed to keep track of all stories
- Secondary analysis at end of reporting period
- A sample of stories was verified by an external evaluator.

Impact of MSC in the Bougainville case study

- Staff gained a whole new view of 'impact' - felt the true 'impact' of the project was contained in the stories
- Helped develop a more fully shared vision
- Combined with a program logic model, the M&E framework received praise from funders.

Use of stories – In addition to reporting, stories can be used:

- To improve planning
- To help explain a point to a participant
- To recruit new participants
- To help explain a point to another member of staff
- For public relations.

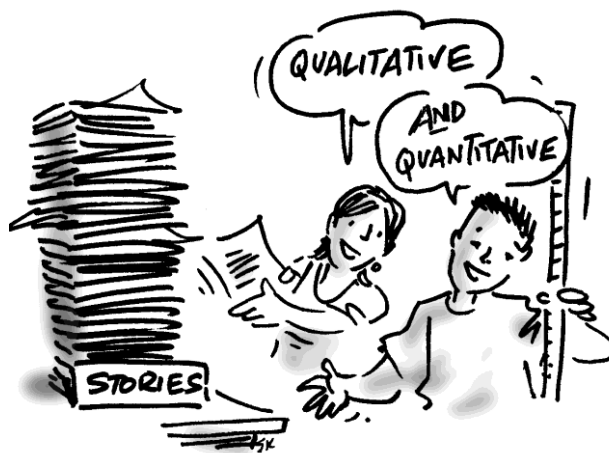
My reflections about the exercise to select the most significant story

2. The theory behind MSC

In this section:

- How does MSC compare to conventional monitoring?
- When should you use MSC (what type of program is it best for)
- Exercise: strengths and weaknesses of MSC

How does MSC compare to conventional monitoring?



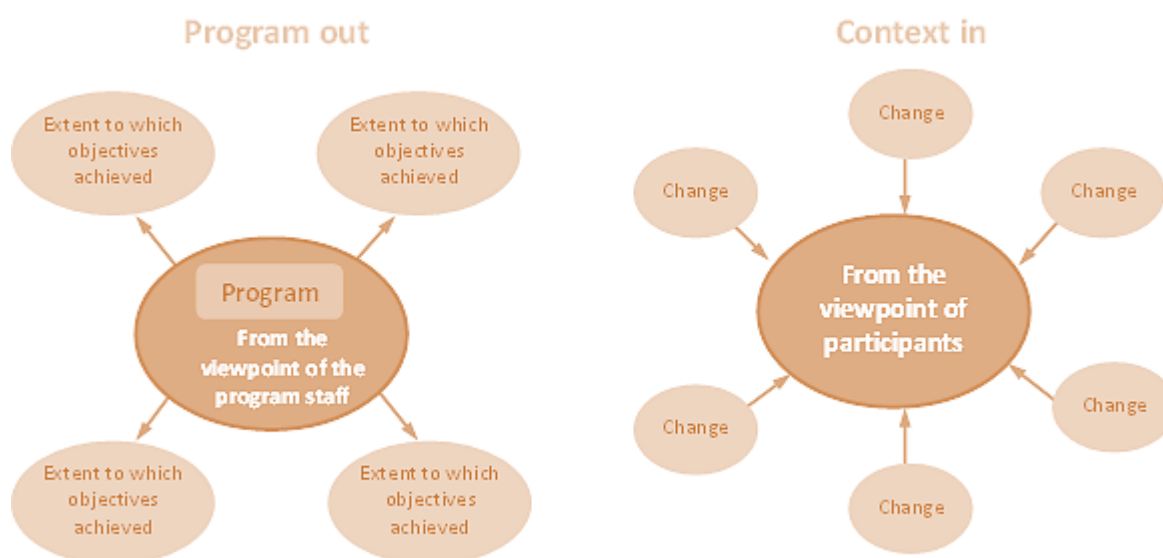
The next section summarises the ways in which MSC differs from more conventional forms of monitoring and evaluation. This section is aimed at highlighting how MSC can complement traditional approaches to M&E by explaining the gaps that it fills. The key differences between the two approaches are generally true of qualitative and quantitative methodologies and are summarised below and then discussed in more detail.

MSC	Traditional
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inductive – about unexpected outcomes• Diversity of views (from field staff and beneficiaries)• Open questioning• Participatory analysis• Puts events in context – ‘thick description’• Enables a changing focus on what’s important• Outer edges of experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Deductive – about expected outcomes• Indicators often determined by senior staff• Closed or specific questioning• Analysis by management• Based on numbers – no context• About ‘proving’ –• Central tendencies

MSC uses inductive inquiry Conventional quantitative monitoring of predetermined indicators only tells us about what we think we need to know. It does not tell us things that we don't realise we need to know. The difference here is between *deductive* and *inductive* approaches. Indicators are often based on some prior theory of what is supposed to happen (deductive). In contrast, MSC uses an *inductive* approach, through participants making sense of events after they have happened. So a key gap that MSC fills within a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework is that it helps us to capture the expected and unexpected results, the intangible and the indirect consequences of our work. By getting this information on a regular basis, and taking time to reflect on what this means, groups of people can alter their direction of effort in order to achieve more of the outcomes they value.

MSC encourages and makes use of a diversity of views In many monitoring and evaluation systems, the indicators or things we measure are defined by people distant from where the events happen. Indicators are often identified by senior executive staff or senior staff specialist research units and are defined by looking out from the project (program out).

MSC gives those closest to the events (e.g. the field staff and beneficiaries) the right to identify a variety of stories that they think are relevant (context in). These are then summarised by selection when other participants choose the most significant of all the stories reported. Here diversity becomes an opportunity for the organisation to decide what direction it wants to go and incorporates the perspectives of the participants (see diagram below). Chris Roche has made a distinction here between 'program out' approaches' and context in approaches.



MSC uses open questions With monitoring and evaluation systems that use predefined indicators, the nature of the information and its meaning is largely defined from the outset. Data must then be collected in as standardised a way as possible. With MSC, participants are actively encouraged to exercise their own judgment in identifying stories and selecting stories collected by others. This involves the use of open-ended questions such as: "From your point of view, what was the most significant change that took place concerning the quality of people's lives in this?" This freedom is especially important in the case of beneficiaries and fieldworkers, whose views might not reach senior management, often as a result of day-to-day management procedures.

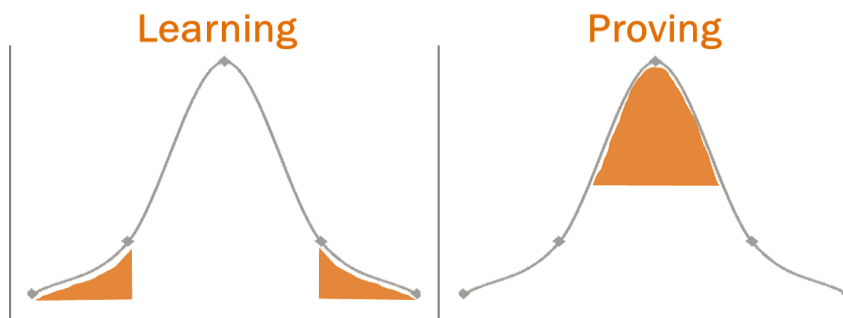
Participatory analysis The data collected by an organisation's monitoring and evaluation system are often analysed on a centralised basis at senior levels of the organisation. Typically, field-level workers do not analyse the data they collect, but simply pass the information up the hierarchy for others to analyse. With MSC, information is not stored or processed centrally, but is distributed throughout the organisation and processed locally. Staff do not only collect information about events, they also evaluate that information according to their own local perspective.



MSC puts events in context Normally when quantitative monitoring data is analysed, it is stripped of context. Central office staff who analyse tables of statistics sent from field offices are usually well removed from the field site. Typically, few text comments accompany statistics sent from fieldworkers. MSC makes use of what has been called ‘thick description’: detailed accounts of events placed in their local context, where people and their views of events are visible. In the world of ordinary people, these often take the form of stories or anecdotes. In MSC monitoring, stories are also accompanied by the writer’s interpretations of what is significant.

MSC enables a changing focus on what is important In most monitoring and evaluation systems, indicators remain essentially the same for each reporting period: the same questions are asked again and again, and the focus remains the same. With MSC, the type of data collected is potentially far more dynamic and can change over time. Participants choose what to report so that MSC stories can reflect real changes in the world as well as changing views within an organisation about what is important. This information can then be fed back into project activities so that they reflect what is important to those involved.

MSC focuses on the outer-edges of experience In most types of social science research, and in evaluation, we are mostly concerned with finding out what *most* people experience from a program or intervention. This is related to the scientific research approach, where the main focus is on proving or disproving hypotheses (see diagram below). However, in MSC we are interested in the outer-edges of experience, rather than in finding out or generalising about the most common experience. This makes MSC useful for investigating unintended outcomes of programs.



MSC's cousins

First cousins:	Less similar to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appreciative Inquiry• 1. Success case method –Brinkerhoff• Critical Incident Technique	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Case studies / vignettes

When should you use MSC?

The type of program where MSC work best

MSC is better suited to some program contexts than others. In a simple program with easily defined outcomes (such as vaccination, perhaps), quantitative monitoring maybe sufficient and would certainly consume less time than MSC. In other program contexts, however, conventional monitoring and evaluation tools may not provide sufficient data to make sense of program impacts and foster learning. The types of programs that are not adequately catered for by orthodox approaches and can gain considerable value from MSC include programs that are:

- complex and produce diverse and emergent outcomes
- focused on social change
- participatory in ethos
- designed with repeated contact between field staff and participants
- struggling with conventional monitoring systems
- highly customised services to a small number of beneficiaries (such as family counselling).

There are also some instances where MSC costs may not justify the benefits. While MSC can be used to address the following, there may be other less time-consuming ways to achieve the same objectives:

- develop good news stories for public relations (PR)
- understand the average experience of participants
- produce an evaluation report for accountability purposes.

Is MSC monitoring **relevant** for your organisation/program context? Some program contexts are more conducive to the successful implementation of MSC. In our experience, some of the key enablers for MSC are having:

- an organisational culture that encourages learning and commitment by management
- 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.

Exercise: Strengths and weaknesses of MSC

In groups discuss the strengths and weaknesses of MSC, and write down any questions you have about the technique or the process.

Strengths	Weaknesses

Questions

1

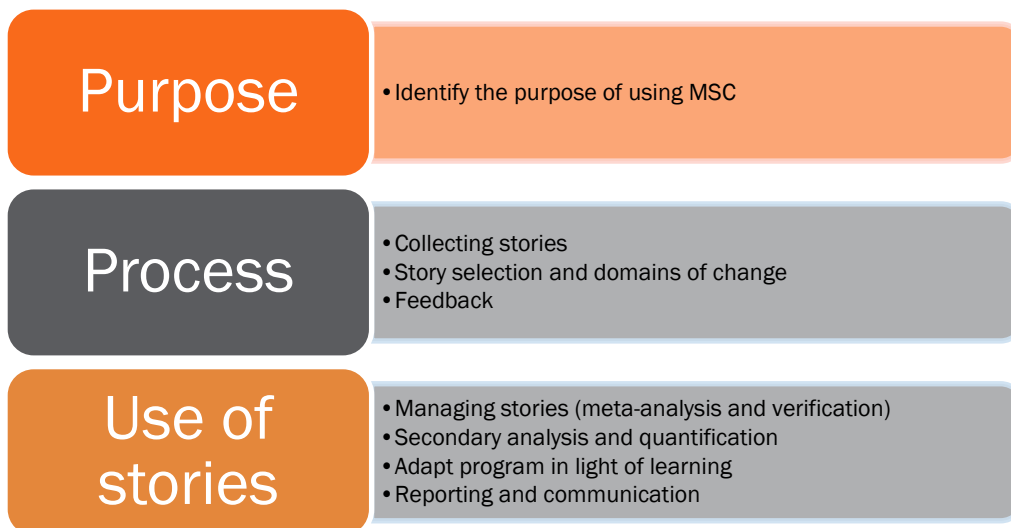
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3. Designing an MSC process and collecting stories

In this section:

- Overview: the core parts of MSC
- Step 1: Identify the purpose of using MSC
- Exercise: Think about the purpose of MSC for your program

The core parts of MSC



Step 1: Identify the purpose of using MSC

MSC within the program cycle



Monitoring tends to be:

- on-going collection of information
- primarily for project management
- MSC monitoring is ongoing cycles of reflection

Evaluation tends to be:



- done less frequently than monitoring
- more analytical – involves judgments of merit or worth
- In evaluation MSC is used as one-line of inquiry and is just done once

How you choose to use MSC within the program cycle depends on:

- Your primary purpose for using it
- The frequency with which you will implement the process

Whichever approach you opt for it is important to understand that MSC is not a stand alone technique, but an important addition to an M&E framework. It should fill the gaps and complement your other methods.

Short loop learning: MSC for Monitoring

MSC was originally designed as a monitoring tool, with regular (i.e. quarterly) cycles of collection, selection and feedback. This was a radical move from more traditional methods of monitoring which were largely focused on numbers. Therefore MSC is impact monitoring (a hybrid). MSC has been successfully used as a monitoring tool, indeed the originally organisation where it was implemented in Bangladesh continues to use it in this way. As monitoring is an 'internal' process within an organisation, the story collection is generally done by project staff and selection initially happens in project teams (and later by senior management/national office). The benefits of a shorter cycle are that:

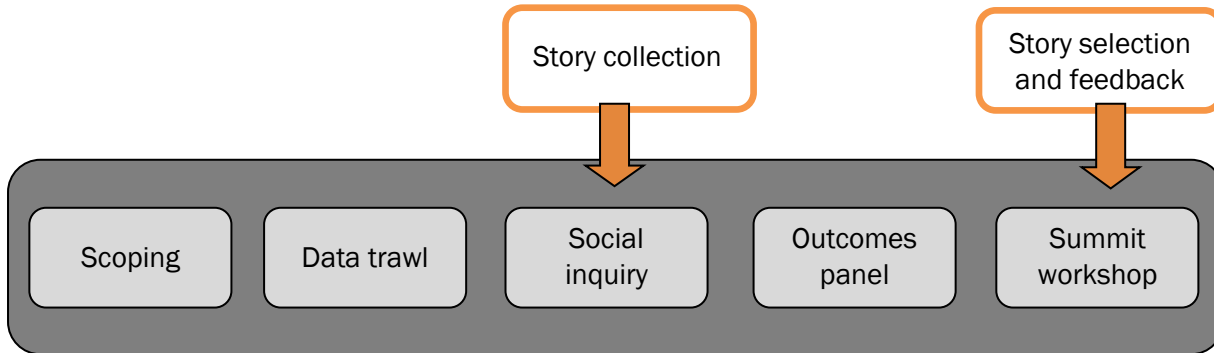
- it has greater potential to build capacity of staff
- provides more immediate information about impact
- encourages more regular reflection
- fosters ownership of M&E by staff.

However, the resources and time required to implement MSC on such a regular basis mean that it may not be practical to maintain at this frequency

MSC for Evaluation

More recently, MSC has been successfully adapted for evaluation. Here, MSC is used as one part of a package of data collection methods. Stories are therefore more likely to be collected by evaluation consultants, though project staff can also be involved if a more participatory evaluation approach is being used. When MSC is being used for evaluation, selection and feedback occur during a one-off “evaluation summit workshop” involving broader stakeholder engagement. MSC and ‘the summit workshop’ have been adapted for use in evaluation as part of Collaborative Outcome Reporting:

Participatory outcomes evaluation



Possible purposes for using MSC

- To fill a gap in existing monitoring data
- To identify unexpected changes
- To understand complex changes that cannot easily be enumerated
- To capture the voice of those the initiative is targeting (i.e. beneficiaries)
- To encourage reflective practice

4. Process of MSC

In this section:

- Step 2: Collect MSC stories (including documentation of stories and ethics of story collection)
- Exercise: Practice collecting and documenting MSC stories, and hints for interviewing
- Domains of change
- Step 3: Story selection: practicalities, selection structure, documenting reasons for selection
- Step 4: Feedback

Step 2: Collecting stories

The MSC process begins by searching for the answer to a simple question, such as:

'Looking back over the last year, what do you think was the most significant change in your life as a result of your involvement with xxx project?'

The question has six parts:

1. *'Looking back over the last year...'* – refers to a specific time period.
2. *'...what do you think was...'* –asks respondents to exercise their own judgment.
3. *'...the most significant...'* –asks respondents to be selective, not to try to comment on everything, but to focus in and report on **one** thing.
4. *'...change...'* –asks respondents to be more selective, to report a change rather than one aspect of the situation or something that was present previously.
5. *'...in your life...'* –asks respondents to be even more selective, not just to report any change but a change in their life. This could be expanded to capture a wider impact in the local community or their participation etc.
6. *'...your involvement with xxx project?'* – Like the first part of the sentence, this establishes some boundaries. This part can also be adjusted.

Central to MSC is the 'story' that is captured in answer to this question. This story is documented so that it can be reviewed by a number of different people and can be circulated within an organisation. The documented

story then acts as a basis for discussion about what is important and this can then lead to a shared understanding about what you are trying to achieve and improvements to project activities.

Information to be documented should include:

1. **Information** about who collected the story and when the events occurred.
2. **Description** of the story itself—what happened.
3. **Significance** (to the storyteller) of events described in the story.

Documenting **who collected the story and when** helps the reader put the story in context and enables any follow-up inquiries to be made about the story, if needed.

The SC story itself should be documented as it is told. The **description** of the change identified as the most significant should include factual information that makes it clear 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.

The storyteller is also asked to explain the **significance** of the story from their point of view. This is a key part of MSC. Some storytellers will naturally end their stories this way, but others will need to be prompted. Without this section, people reading and discussing the story may not understand why the story was significant to the storyteller.

It is important though 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 encourage the writer to make it more explicit. When people give hazy or unspecific answers, this may be because they think their readers will know all the background, or they may simply not have all the details. The more specific and detailed the MSC account is, the more credible it will be, partly because it will be easier to verify.

What's in a story?

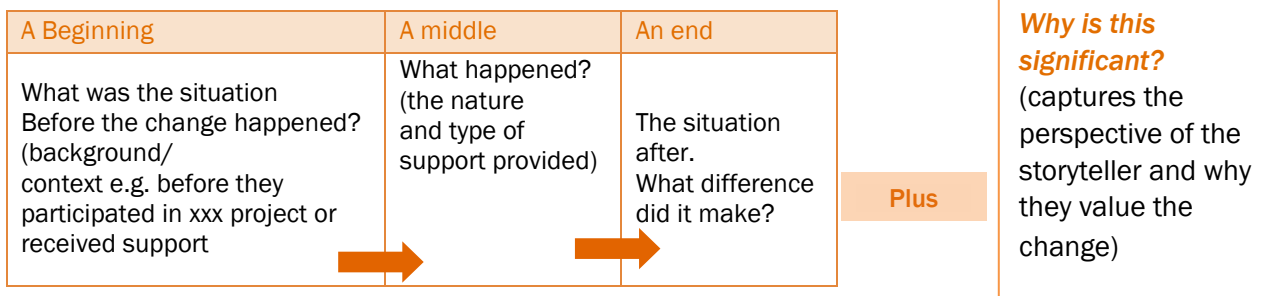
In essence a story should contain three parts:

- a beginning
- a middle and
- an end!

E.g. Things were bad...
then the project came...
Now things are better!

However, in order to fully understand the significance of the change from 'bad' to 'better' the two situations need to be described. For instance, if somebody tells you that they used to have to walk to school, but now it's much easier because they can take a bus, what does it actually mean? How long did they have to walk? What were the implications of this for their life? How is the situation different now that they take the bus? What difference has this made beyond the time saved? What are they able to do with the extra time? This extra detail helps the reader to understand the 'significance' of the change.

A story should therefore contain these three central parts and should end by explaining why the storyteller believes it to be of significance (see below).



Therefore, while the initial question - 'Looking back over the last year, what do you think was the most significant change in as a result of your involvement with XXX project?' - forms the basis of the information we are seeking, in reality a number of additional probing questions are often needed in order to 'capture' the full story.

Assign a title

Finally, the story should be assigned a title that sums up what the story is about. It is a good idea to give stories a catchy title that captures the essence of the story and lets the reader know what it is about.

Stories are about outcomes!

MSC is particularly useful for collecting data at the intermediate outcome level.

What are intermediate outcomes?

- Ways in which outputs lead to long-term changes associated with broader goals
- Stepping stones towards the achievement of goals
- Intermediate outcomes relate to a medium timeframe
- Some common examples of intermediate outcomes:
 - change in the attitudes and practices of community, e.g. what community are doing differently as a result of participation in projects
 - changes in policy or practices of institutions and organisations

What is the purpose of collecting data at this level?

- Is our key to determining progress towards achieving final objectives – which can take years to demonstrate and are hard to attribute to activities
- Provision of useful information for adaptive management

How to collect stories

There are several ways in which SC stories can be identified, collected and then documented. The choice of method depends in part on how actively the organisation wants to search for new SC stories, and how much time and resources are available. Active searching is likely to be more demanding in terms of the amount of time that is required. Active searching through purposive interviews also runs the risk of producing 'expected' accounts of change by the respondents. Whichever method is chosen, a story collection guide is recommended to document the stories. There are several methods by which SC stories can be collected. These are discussed in more detail below.

By individual interview This is a more structured approach to collecting stories whereby the program staff or evaluator 'interview' beneficiaries or partners. Stories can be documented either from comprehensive notes by hand (To strengthen this method, interviewers read their notes back to the storyteller to check they have captured the essence of the story), or using an audio recorder. The story is more valid if it is recorded in the storyteller's own words. The technique can be improved by using a semi-structured interview guide. Such

interviews can be a useful way of generating many SC stories in a short time through the efforts of a group of people who are dedicated to the task.

During group discussion Rather than having one person interviewing another, a group of people can share their SC stories. For example, sharing stories at committee meetings can trigger additional stories from other people who are present. It is a very human thing to respond to a story with a second one! A tape recorder can be used at these meetings to record spontaneous SC stories. Stories collected in a group situation can also be documented using pen and paper. This can be a very fruitful and enjoyable way of collecting stories.

The beneficiaries or stakeholders write the story directly Another technique is for beneficiaries or other stakeholders to document their own stories. For example, an invitation could be made for people to describe what they have done and the impact that it has had on them/their family/the community. This could be as part of a competition or similar initiative to encourage people to document stories. In this case, guidance would need to be given on the type of information required. As with the use of group discussion, the use of this method depends on the presence of a mechanism for stakeholder involvement. Unlike other methods this technique is dependent on storytellers having adequate literacy levels to document their own stories.

Program staff write down unsolicited stories that they have heard In this case, program staff document unsolicited stories they have heard in the course of their work. The implicit assumption here is that program staff should come to learn about change stories in the normal course of their work because they have regular and close contact with beneficiaries. In this instance stories are collected in an opportunistic way, instead of by actively going out to collect stories.

Program staff write the story directly It is also possible for the program staff to document their own stories of change. It should be made clear that the story is being written by the program staff about a change they are describing from their own perspective. This method is also good for documenting negative stories which can then be discussed during selection. This can be a useful process to bring known issues to the table with a view to fine-tuning and improving activities.

Ethics of collecting stories

Attention must be paid to the ethics of collecting stories from individuals. We suggest that you develop processes to track consent right from start. When a storyteller tells a story, the person collecting the story needs to explain how the story is to be used and to check that the storyteller is happy for the story to be used in that way. The storyteller should also be asked whether they wish their name to accompany the story. If not, names need to be deleted from the story from then on.

If a person or group is mentioned or identifiable within a story not told by them, ask the storyteller to consult with the third party to check whether they are happy for their name to be mentioned in the story. If a storyteller wants to tell a story about a third party without naming that person, the identity of that person should be protected.

Hints for Interviewing

Take time to build a connection before beginning the conversation

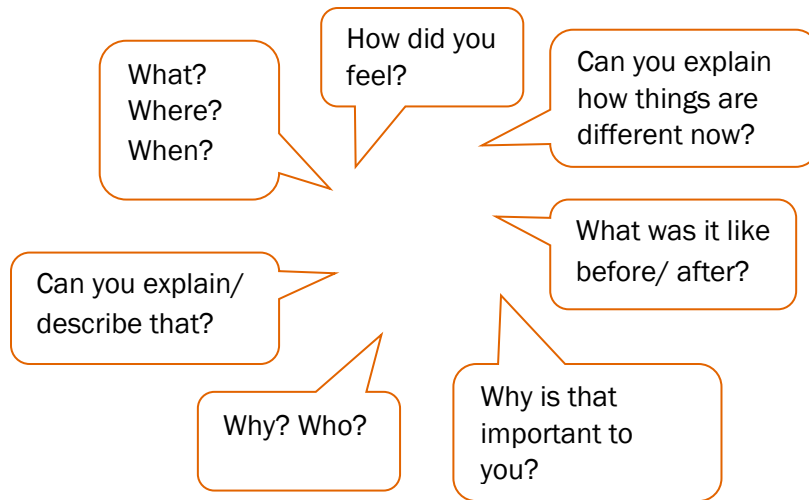
Introduce yourself. Make a little informal time at the start hearing who this person is. Question one is aimed at helping this happen. Let them know a little about who you are, or simply tell them about the interview process.

Start broad then focus

Ask about all the different changes that have occurred before you ask which has been significant.

Probe, don't lead!

Some people may need a little help to get their story out. It is fine to use encouraging probes such as – “can you give me some more details about how this happened” or “can you give me an example of that”, or “who did it involve?” Or “how did it all begin?” Often we use the 5 friends (who, where, what, why, and how). But try not to lead the informant. If you do have some very specific questions that you want to ask them then wait until the MSC questions are complete. Eliciting an MSC story is very different than conducting a questionnaire.



Listen

Remember when you are interviewing, it's your role to suspend your opinion and listen to what the interviewee has to say.

Give people time and space to take things at their own pace

Some people warm up immediately; others take time. If the interview begins to get really interesting just as it's finishing, see if there is time to go back and think again about earlier questions.

Show your partner that you are really listening and that you really care

Keep your body relaxed and open – comfortably close, and gently facing them. Try to avoid being separated from them by a table. Make eye contact. Allow your facial expression, and verbal reinforcement to reflect your genuine interest. If you are curious and want some more information, by all means ask for it!

Go back over what you've learned to confirm for accuracy

Have the interviewee read over what you have written. Give them the option to modify or change anything you've written, to help it more fully express the essence of what they said.

Thank them

After the interview has finished thank them, and tell them what you have learned as a result of the interview.

Exercise: Story collection and documentation

- Form pairs and take it in turns to collect stories of significant change from one another.
- To collect the stories, ask the following question:
Thinking back over the last 5 to 10 years, what has been the most significant change you can think of as a result of attending a training course?
- A story documentation template are presented in the following pages.

Example Story Collection Guide

Background:

We (the people from XX) are hoping to capture some stories about changes that may have resulted from any educational training you have participated in. If you are happy with this, I will ask you 3 or 4 questions and record your answers. I will go over what I have written at the end to make sure you are happy with it.

We hope to use the stories and information collected from your interviews for a number of purposes including:

- to help us understand what participants think is good and not so good
- to make improvements to our work
- to tell our funders what has been achieved.

Contact Details

Name of storyteller * _____

Name of person recording story _____

Location _____

Date of recording _____

** (If they wish to remain anonymous, don't record their name or contact details – just write "community member or some similar description.)*

Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself

2. What training have you been to in the last few years?

3. Please list all the changes that you feel have resulted from training courses you have attended in the last few years.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

4. We have been talking about a number of changes (refer to list above), from your point of view, which do you think is the MOST significant change. Please try to describe this change in the form of a story.

Beginning (situation before the change)

Middle (what happened?)

End (situation after)

5. Why did you choose this change in particular? E.g. Why was it significant for you?

6. Confidentiality

We may like to use your stories for reporting to our donors, or sharing with other participants and trainers:

Do you, (the storyteller):

- want to have your name on the story (tick one) Yes No
- consent to us using your story for publication (tick one) Yes No

Reflection on story collection task

	<i>Rewarding aspects (What was good?)</i>	<i>Challenging aspects (What was difficult?)</i>
Being the one documenting the story		
Being the one telling your story		

Domains of change

Domains of change are broad categories of changes. They can help with selection of stories so that very different types of stories are not considered together. Domains are not essential for MSC, but can help when there are a lot of stories to select. Some organisations have used them to help track specific objectives, but there are many ways to cut the cake!

Our experience is that it is better to collect the first round of stories without domains, then look to see what sort of stories are emerging – only then determine the domains of change. It also helps to include an ‘open window’ domain to include stories that don’t fit into the pre-determined categories.

Why use domains during story selection?

Dividing SC stories up into domains can make story selection process easier to manage. If you have domains, SC stories from each domain can be considered separately, so that you are not comparing ‘apples to pears’. This helps if you are going to collect and select among many SC stories.

There are two main ways of determining domains; the first distinguishes SC stories by their content the second by stakeholder groups:

1. If domains are to refer to the content of the SC stories, many organisations base the domains on their pre-existing high order objectives. This allows them to track whether they are achieving their objectives. Alternatively new categories can be developed.
2. Domains can be used to help describe SC stories from different stakeholders e.g.: significant changes from beneficiaries, from program staff, from partners.

Step 3: Story selection

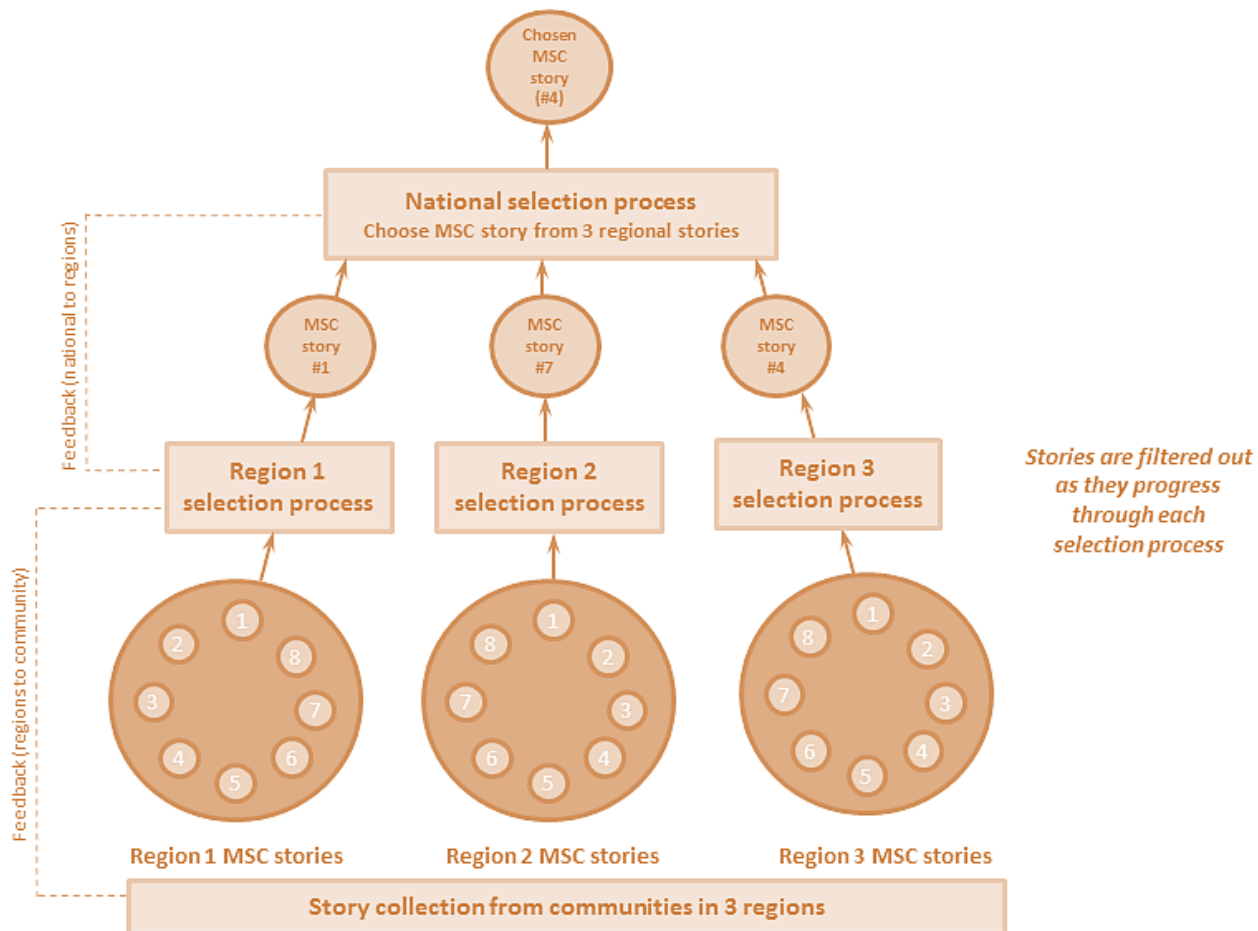
The selection structure

Central to MSC is the review and selection of stories. This is where most learning occurs as the process encourages an in-depth conversation about the initiative in question. During selection stories are analysed for meaning and outcomes. The selection process is therefore a form of reflective practice, something which is often lacking in project management.

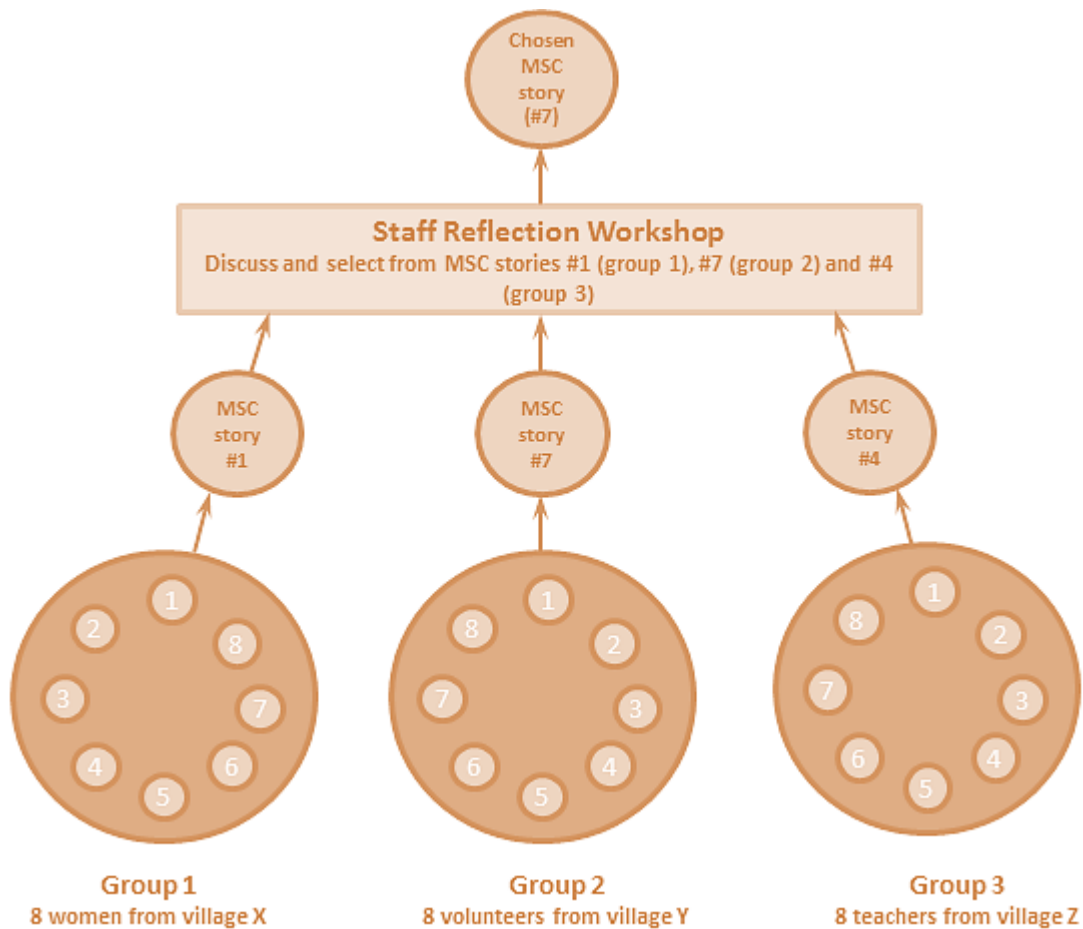
There are different approaches to organising a selection process and the structure depends on the particular programmatic or organisational context. Selection structures normally reflect the organisational structure whether that be hierarchical or flat.

A hierarchical selection structure

This hierarchical process can be structured in different ways—one way is for the structure to ‘ride on the back’ of the existing organisational structure, and another is to set up specific structures for selecting SCs. People discuss SCs within their area and submit the most significant of these to the level above, which then selects the most significant of all the SCs submitted by the lower levels and passes this on to the next level. In a hierarchical selection process, the number of stories is progressively reduced. The diagram below illustrates this process. In this example, the selection process at the national level involves three stories (selected by each of the three regions), rather than the full 24 stories collected (eight stories from each of the three regions). This type of selection process can be useful if you are planning to collect a large volume of stories.



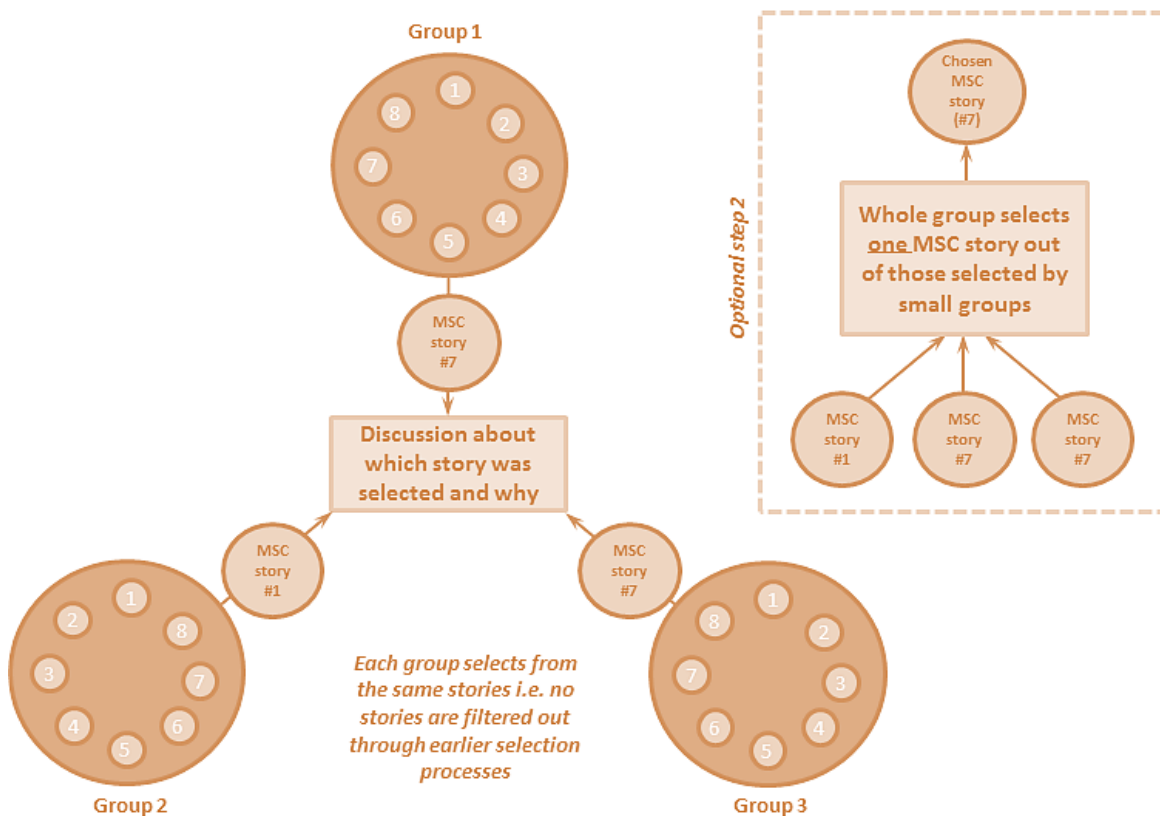
A hierarchical selection process can also incorporate the views of project beneficiaries, if this is an important consideration for your organisation. In the diagram below, MSC stories were collected from a group of women, a group of volunteers and a group of teachers. Each of these stakeholder groups was asked to choose the most significant change for their group. These chosen stories were then used in a staff reflection workshop. At the workshop, staff chose the most significant story from their perspective.



A flat selection structure

In a flat structure, different groups can select from the same stories and then share which story they selected and why. You can either leave the selection process here, and end up with multiple stories of significant change and the reasons for their selection or take the process one step further. After each group selects the most significant story from their perspective, you can ask the whole group to select one MSC story and give reasons why this is the most important change. The diagram on the following page shows this selection process.

These types of selection processes are best used when you have a small volume of stories – it would be impractical to ask each small group to read fifty stories and choose the most significant. Alternatively, if you are short on time you can give each small group a selection of different stories. Once each small group has chosen their MSC story, you can ask the whole group to choose the most significant story overall. Essentially, this is a hierarchical selection process where stories are progressively filtered out but it occurs with the same group of people rather than different committees at various levels.



Reflection on story collection task

	<i>Advantages</i>	<i>Disadvantages</i>
Hierarchical structure		
Flat structure		

Methods of selection

The selection process invariably begins with reading some or all of the stories either out loud or individually. We tend to prefer reading the stories aloud, as it brings the stories to life, but the effectiveness and practicality of this may depend on the context. If the stories have already been sorted into different categories, then all the stories from one category are considered together. A similar question to the collection process is used by those who read the stories:

“From among all these significant changes, what do you think was the most significant change of all?” AND “Why do you think this is significant?”

Various facilitated and un-facilitated processes can be used to help groups choose the most significant story.

Facilitated discussion/Iterative voting In iterative voting, after the first vote, people discuss why they voted as they did. This is followed by a second and then a third vote, ideally with some movement towards consensus. In some cases, the participants who disagree with the majority view will eventually decide to agree. Where they are unwilling to do so, their views can be recorded as an important caveat to the group’s main judgment: for example, about an aspect of the story that was unclear or contradicted the main point of the story. Where groups remain more evenly split in their opinions, two stories may need to be chosen. Iterative voting can be time-consuming, but it fosters good quality judgments.

Negotiation This method is similar to iterative voting but tends not to be facilitated. Each person states which story they wish to select and why. This is followed by a discussion of the merits of each story and reason for selection until a consensus or agreement is reached. As with the previous method if consensus is not possible the views of those who do not agree are recorded. This process requires staff to be able to argue their case and can be a good way to foster this skill. There is the danger however that those who dominate the discussion or are more skilled at negotiation may end up determining which story is selected.

Secret ballot (or blind voting) It is also possible to cast votes anonymously. Each person writes their choice of SC story on a slip of paper, and then the total votes are presented. This should be followed by an open discussion of the reasons for the choice. This process can be surprisingly useful, especially if there are power inequalities in the group, or if people are initially reluctant to cast their votes publicly. It is important to remember that in MSC, transparency is an important way of making subjectivity accountable. Therefore, it is very important to add the second step of capturing and discussing the reasons for choice.

Scoring Instead of voting, participants can rate the value of a SC story. The ratings for each of the stories are then aggregated and the story with the highest rating is selected as the most significant. This is a more discriminating way of summarising judgments than a simple show of hands. It is also a method that can be used remotely, as well as in face-to-face meetings. The downside is the limited opportunity for dialogue, although explanations for ratings can be given at the same time as the ratings. Explanations are especially important when a participant rates an SC story much higher or lower than other participants.

Documenting the reasons for selection

The reasons for selecting an SC story as the most significant should be documented and attached to the story. Because documenting the reasons for selection is usually the last task in a selection meeting, there is a risk that this will be done too hastily and that what is written will not do justice to the depth of discussion or the quality of the judgments made. Explanations should be more than a few key words, such as 'more sustainable' or 'gender equity'. Full sentences should be used to express what was seen as significant in the selected SC story. If multiple criteria were used to justify the selection of a story, these should be listed along with an explanation of their relative importance.



After selection: Zoom out questions

After choosing your most significant change story in the section process, it is a great idea to ask the following questions:

- Are there any issues arising from a specific story?
- Action to be taken related to a specific story?
- What do this set of stories tell us about the extent to which we achieving our outcomes?
- What stories are not being told?
- What are the key leanings? General actions?

Analysis can also include identifying key outcomes and facilitating factors from across all the stories, which can then be grouped according to themes or objectives.

Step 4: Feedback

Feedback is important in all monitoring, evaluation and learning-oriented systems, and MSC is no exception. The results of a selection process must be fed back to those who provided the SC stories. At the very least, this feedback should explain which SC was selected as most significant and why.

Feedback about why a selection was made can expand or challenge participants' views of what is significant. Feedback about the selection process can help participants to assess the quality of the collective judgments that were made. Feedback also shows that others have read and engaged with the SC stories—rather than simply filed them, which is the unfortunate fate of a lot of monitoring data.

Providing feedback about what was selected, and why and how, can potentially complete a communication loop between different levels of participants in an organisation. In doing so, it can create an ongoing dialogue about what significant change actually is and can inform the future direction of a program.

How to provide feedback

Feedback can be provided verbally or via email, newsletters and formal reports. For example, informal reports can be provided after each selection meeting. These could include which stories were selected and why, comments on stories not selected and recommendations for future action. Feedback could also be provided verbally or by email to the program team. In one case a formal report was produced after one year which contained all the stories selected and included the funders' feedback. Some MSC users have placed the selected stories and the reasons for their choice in community newsletters and circulated to all participants.

5. Use of MSC stories

In this section:

- Step 5: Managing stories (meta-analysis and verification)
- Step 6: Secondary analysis and quantification
- Step 7: Adapting your program
- Step 8: Reporting and communicating

Step 5: Managing stories (meta-analysis and verification)

Meta-analysis

In preparation for meta-monitoring, it is useful to keep a record of your stories and key information about your informants. This data should be stored in a secure location (e.g. on a password protected computer) and attention needs to be paid to privacy, particularly if you have had informants who did not wish to have their names associated with their stories.

A useful way of storing information about MSC stories is in a spreadsheet. You might like to consider collecting the following information:

- a serial number for each story
- the title of each story
- the date it was recorded
- the name of the person who documented the story
- some details about the storyteller: job, gender, region, etc.
- the date of the first selection process
- the outcome of the selection process
- the date of the second selection process
- the recommendation made for follow-up action
- what action was taken on the recommendations that were made.

Some of these points may be more relevant to MSC processes used for program monitoring rather than for evaluation (e.g. recommendations for action).

If you have conducted several rounds of MSC, it can be useful to conduct meta-monitoring using the stories you have collected and the information about them stored on your spreadsheet. Meta-monitoring involves 'zooming out' from your stories to consider the types of stories that have been selected, looking for patterns over time.

Meta-monitoring may examine:

- patterns in the number of stories collected during a certain reporting period
- patterns in storytellers or informants, such as variations in gender, region, occupation or other project-specific characteristics
- patterns in the kinds of stories that are being selected, examined across characteristics such as gender, ethnicity or other domains.

Managing and monitoring stories in this way can be useful to those who design and implement MSC processes. An awareness of patterns in story collection and selection can help inform changes to the process which enable a more representative approach to data collection. Even if you do not use the meta-monitoring information to guide your MSC process, it is important to be aware of the limitations of your MSC data.

Verification

Verification involves carrying out additional investigation to check the accuracy of stories, or the events contained within them. It may not be necessary or appropriate for your program, but can be useful when other forms of data contradict your MSC stories. There are two ways in which reported changes can be selected for verification:

- Making random checks of reported changes. This method is not advocated and we don't know of any organisation that has made use of random checks.
- Making checks on those changes that have been selected as most significant of all, i.e. those that are selected as most significant at all levels, from the field level, through middle management, up to senior management. Given the weight of meaning attached to these reported changes it makes sense to make sure that the foundations are secure, in the sense that the basic facts of what happened are basically correct.

Step 6: Secondary analysis and quantification

Secondary analysis

Some organisations choose to analyse all the SC stories together – both those selected and those not selected. This can be done in a variety of ways such as thematic analysis. For an example of this analysis – look at the Target 10 evaluation stories publication on www.clearhorizon.com.au. Often it involves looking for key themes and quantifying how many times each theme has occurred across all the stories. Examples of types of analysis include:

- to produce *summary statements* about the most significant changes taking place overall [using classic summary by selection]
- to identify *differences and similarities between different stakeholders* in terms of their views of what are MSCs [using hierarchical selection]
- to identify *types of MSCs* [using free sorting, plus network analysis]
- to identify the *most significant differences between types of MSCs* [using hierarchical card sorting]
- to analyse the *consequences of the MSCs* [using evolving storylines]
- to analyse the *causes of the MSCs* [by developing network models of the relationships between the stories].

For more information on the methods mentioned above, go to “Rick’s Methods” at <http://mande.co.uk/special-issues/>

Quantification

One form of secondary analysis in MSC is to quantify the emergence of a particular theme across a random sample of the population.

- To identify *candidate impacts* that an evaluation would then systematically collect quantitative data on
- To identify dynamic indicators of changes that could be used for one off explorations.

For example, in the Target 10 implementation several stories explored the way dairy farmers were feeling more confident to challenge the feed stock agents as a result of the workshop on cow nutrition. This was an

'unexpected' outcome to the project team. They could have done a short phone survey to determine how wide spread this change was. In the MSC guide we refer to this usage as developing 'dynamic indicators'.

Step 7: Adapt program in the light of learning

One of the biggest failings in monitoring and evaluation is that findings are frequently underused. If this happens with MSC monitoring, you may need to ask yourself why this occurred. For example:

- was this because the mechanisms for adapting the program are not in place?
- the purpose of MSC is not fully understood?
- MSC is not delivering the kind of information that can be used to inform the program?

Program teams should allow time for reflection on progress and opportunities to incorporate lessons into practice. It is amazing what can be achieved if this is done well. Don't wait until the program has finished to start using the data! When MSC is used for monitoring, the scope for making changes to a program is likely to be focused more on fine-tuning. We recommend that you augment this with a more strategic reflection once a year. We refer to this as an "annual reflection workshop". This is a great time to reflect on all your data, from MSC, from quantitative indicators and any other methods from your monitoring and evaluation plan. (see appendix 1)

Step 8: Reporting and communication

Communication

Stories provide useful information about what is happening on the ground. This information, particularly where things are working well or going wrong, could be useful learning for others involved in similar initiatives. Similarly, can be a good way of promoting community members voice.

Reporting

MSC stories are a useful part of reporting on outcomes. There are a number of ways in which they can be incorporated into an outcome/impact evaluation or annual report. Sometimes, selected stories can sit next to an executive summary at the front of an evaluation report to give a 'snap shot' of what the project has achieved and validate the message in the summary. Sometimes they are used as a standalone booklet.

Appendix 1: Using MSC in an evaluation – the evaluation summit technique

What is the Evaluation Summit Technique?

Blending features of the Most Significant Change technique and ‘Appreciative Inquiry’, the Evaluation Summit Technique is characterised by a large group workshop in which a range of stakeholders and implementers are encouraged to participate. Going beyond merely consulting stakeholders, the evaluation summit technique sees stakeholders analysing transcripts and synthesising key outcomes.

The summit workshop involves participants analyzing qualitative and quantitative data and debating what constitutes key outcomes and issues. The workshop process culminates in participants developing recommendations. The purpose of the summit workshop is to ensure that judgments made in the evaluation process are based on values of the stakeholders as well as the evaluators.

Evaluation summit workshops form the final process step of all Clear Horizon “Collaborative Outcomes Reports” (COR). However, they can also be used to synthesise the findings of any evaluation process by way of a large group process.

The Story of its Development

At Clear Horizon we use a variety of evaluation techniques attempt to modify for them to meet client’s needs. We use both Most Significant Change (MSC) and Appreciative Inquiry as part of our work. We use Appreciate Inquiry largely as a planning process, and we have used MSC for continual improvement and impact monitoring. Increasingly, we were asked to apply participatory, values-based approaches to conducting largely external evaluations.

Our clients, who valued MSC, challenged us to conduct external evaluations in a manner that would enable participation and inclusion. This was especially important where they wished to engender ownership of the findings amongst staff and stakeholders. We also recognized that MSC was never designed as a one-off method to be used in external evaluation settings. MSC on its own was not sufficiently robust or appropriate for external evaluation purposes.

Then we had a breakthrough by combining some more traditional evaluation methods with what we do in MSC and some of what we do in Appreciative Inquiry – hence the evaluation summit technique was born! We have come to use this technique in a variety of evaluation contexts to engage stakeholders in the analysis of data and the creation of recommendations. The number one advantage is that it takes participants on a journey to understand why programs need to be modified and gives them a sense of ownership over the recommendations. This results in a far higher likelihood that findings will get used, addressing the biggest failing of traditional evaluation.

Evaluation Summit Technique – The Bare Bones

Stage One – Discover (can be addressed by many evaluation planning steps)

- Scope the key evaluation questions with client
- Determine methodology for inquiry
- Determine who the informants should be
- Collection of primary data and secondary data.

Stage Two – Prepare data during initial analysis

- Prepare a results display that summarises the qualitative and quantitative data against expected outcomes – for example using a results chart
- Code qualitative data to determine preliminary achievements, and issues
- Draw out key vignettes from any transcripts
- Draw out key issue quotes from transcripts and secondary data

Stage Three - Evaluation Summit Workshop

- Context: evaluators present background and an overview of the preliminary findings
- Discover key outcomes: participants analyze key outcomes and what constitutes these (e.g. 'key successes to us')
- Discover key areas for strengthening: analysis of key issues and challenges
- Synthesize findings into a way forward: participants asked to consider what they need to 'drop', 'keep', and 'create'
- Provocative questions: provide participants with the opportunity to identify unaddressed issues
- Recommend: participants create draft recommendations.

Stage Four - Design and Report:

- Document workshop notes as a brief report.

Optional further steps:

- A smaller group workshop with project team to fine tune/ prioritise recommendations, and develop an action plan
- Production of a more substantial and detailed report if required
- Develop a refreshed program logic model and implementation plan using a second workshop.

Taste of the evaluation summit workshop

Task 1 - Discover key outcomes from data

- On tables read the first vignettes out aloud
- Identify the key outcomes/ benefits and write one per post-it note – stick on vignette
- Repeat for other 2 vignettes
- Decide which story presents the most significant change for your group – that you wish to have included in the final report
- Document reasons why

Task 2 - Discover key areas for strengthening

Facilitator will present a few points on key challenges – take notes individually on this

- Read the issue tables through together
- Write one key issue on each card
- Score them as to how important it is for us to address this in the recommendations
- Add new issues you see that are not covered in the tables

Task 3 - Synthesize

In groups discuss what you think we should:

- keep, drop, improve, create
- Write one thing per card and place on shower curtain

Please consider the best of what we have, the areas for improvement, your own experience....

Task 4 - Probe with provocative questions

- Individually write down any questions that *remained unanswered...*
- Phrase statements as “what if...”
- Do as many as you wish

Task 5 – Prioritise and create recommendations

- Consider keep, drop, create, and provocative questions
- What are key areas for recommendations you want to make sure happen in the next phase of the program

Place your stickers on these!

Appendix 2: Planning your MSC project

What is the purpose of using MSC?

Who do you need to gain support from for using MSC?

Who will you collect stories from?

Who will collect stories (internal or external)?

Who will be involved in selecting the most significant change story? Why?

What structure will you use for story selection? Why?

How will you feedback information to the story tellers and other stakeholders?

How will you use stories and/or analyse?

Appendix 3: Key resources for MSC

- MSC User guide: can be downloaded at www.clearhorizon.com.au
- Quick start guide: can be downloaded at www.clearhorizon.com.au
- Training available through Clear Horizon – twice a year
- Egroup, and repository of many papers from all over the world on MSC:
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MostSignificantChanges>

Key Papers:

Rick Davies and Jess Dart (2005) The Most Significant Change User guide. Available at www.clearhorizon.com.au

Dart, J. J. & Davies R.J. (2003) A dialogical story-based evaluation tool: the most significant change technique, *American Journal of Evaluation* 24, 137-155.

Dart, J. J. (2000). *Stories for change: A new model of evaluation for agricultural extension projects in Australia*. PhD thesis, Institute of Land and Food Resources. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

Dart, J.J. (1999a). 'A story approach for monitoring change in an agricultural extension project'.

Proceedings of the Association for qualitative research (AQR) international conference. Melbourne: AQR, [online]: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/aqr/offer/papers/JDart.htm>.

Dart, J.J. (1999b). 'The tale behind the performance story approach'. *Evaluation News and Comment*, 8, no.1, 12-13.

Davies, R. J. (1996). *An evolutionary approach to facilitating organisational learning: An experiment by the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh*. Swansea. UK: Centre for Development Studies, [online]: <http://www.swan.ac.uk/cds/rd/ccdb.htm>. This paper has also been published, with some variations, in Mosse, D. Farrington, J., and Rew, A. (1998) *Development as process: concepts and methods for working with complexity*. London: Routledge/ODI (pp 68-83); and in *Impact assessment and project Appraisal*, 16. No. 3, September 1998, 243-250.

Davies, R. J. (1998). *Order and diversity: Representing and assisting organisational learning in non-government aid organisations*. PhD thesis. Swansea. UK: Centre for Development Studies, [online]: www.swan.ac.uk/cds/rd/thesis.htm.