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The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique

A Guide to Its Use

by

Rick Davies and Jess Dart

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Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Australia
AKRSP	Aga Khan Rural Support Program
BADSP	Brong Ahafo Rural District Support Project, Ghana
CCDB	Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
DFID	Department for International Development, UK
IDSS	International Development Support Services, Australia
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MSC	most significant change (MSC) technique
NGO	non-government organisation
ONZB	Oxfam New Zealand
SC stories	Significant change stories
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas

Preface: The Structure of this Guide

This publication is aimed at organisations, community groups, students and academics who wish to use MSC to help monitor and evaluate their social change programs and projects, or to learn more about how it can be used. The technique is applicable in many different sectors, including agriculture, education and health, and especially in development programs. It is also applicable to many different cultural contexts. MSC has been used in a wide variety of countries by a range of organisations. By 2004, MSC had been used both by NGOs and governments in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and Australasia.

The structure of this Guide

The introductory chapter provides a quick overview of MSC. In Chapter 2 we focus on the practicalities of implementing MSC and divide the process into ten steps. Chapter 3 offers guidance on practical troubleshooting, and Chapter 4 looks at building capacity for effective use of MSC. In Chapter 5 we examine how MSC fits into the program cycle and how it can contribute to program improvement.

After Chapter 5, we delve more into the theory. We believe that MSC can be successfully implemented without a strong understanding of the theory. So if you just want to know about the practicalities – stop there! But for those readers who enjoy a foray into theory, Chapters 6 and 7 examine validity in MSC and how it fits with other approaches and epistemologies. The final two chapters outline the evolution of MSC: where it came from and where it might be heading next.

The structure of this Guide reflects our attempt to cater for different types of use. We want the Guide to be of practical help to those choosing to implement MSC for the first time. But we also want to provide information and analysis that will be of use to those who are already experienced in using MSC yet want to extend their knowledge of the technique or refine the way they use it. As well as addressing the needs of practitioners, we also hope to address the interests of those doing research on MSC and related methods of participatory and qualitative research.

Notes about the terminology

We struggled at times in writing this Guide to find language that worked equally well in the development sector and the public sector of developed economies. We have made a few choices in the name of consistency and we encourage you to consider translating these terms to ones that makes sense for you.

Firstly, we had to decide how to refer to the people who are targeted by social change programs. In the development sector, these people are often referred to as beneficiaries. In the public sector context of developed economies, they are referred to as clients, service users or participants. In this publication we used the term ‘participant’ where the meaning is clear, and ‘beneficiary’ as a second resort.

Secondly, we needed to choose between program, project and intervention. In this publication we have chosen to use the term 'program' to cover all descriptions of social interventions with a beginning and an end, regardless of size.

Thirdly, we needed to describe the people who fund programs and are variously referred to as donors, investors, funders or purchasers. In this Guide we settled on the term 'funders'.

In the published literature, MSC is sometimes called an approach, at other times a process – it has even been referred to as a model. The experts have advised us that it is a monitoring and evaluation technique. However, we also believe that MSC embodies some aspects of an approach because it has a particular theoretical basis; this is discussed further in Chapter 7.

Disclaimer

This publication is based on the collective experience of Rick Davies and Jess Dart in monitoring and evaluating social programs. While we make every effort to ensure the accuracy of this work, any judgments as to the suitability of information for the reader's purposes are the reader's responsibility. We cannot extend any warranties, and assume no responsibility, for the suitability of this information or the consequences of its use.

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Please address all inquiries to:

Dr Rick Davies	Dr Jessica Dart
82 Bishops Rd, Trumpington, Cambridge CB2 2NH United Kingdom	Clear Horizon, PO Box 341, Hastings VIC 3915 Australia
rick@mande.co.uk	jess@clearhorizon.com.au
Phone: 44 (0) 1223 841 367	Phone/fax: 61 (0) 3 5979 2957
Mobile: 44 (0) 7855 766 354	Mobile: 0425 735 530
Fax (to Email): 44 08701 640 239	

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Exchange, United Kingdom	www.healthcomms.org
Ibis, Denmark	www.ibis.dk
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While both authors have considerable experience of using MSC, we have also tried to make use of the growing body of grey literature on other people's experiences with using MSC. We would like to acknowledge all the authors of this material, who are listed in the bibliography at the end of the Guide.

We would also like to thank the following for their comments on the draft version of this guide: Jay Goulden, CARE; Deborah Elkington, Oxfam CAA; Robyn Kerr, ADRA; Silke Mason, Ibis; Gillian Holmes, Ibis; Peter Sisgaard, MS.

Chapter One: **A Ten Minute Overview of MSC**

What is MSC, in a nutshell?

The most significant change (MSC) technique 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 occurs 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.

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 regular and often 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.

What's in a name?

MSC has had several names since it was conceived with each emphasising a different aspect.

Monitoring-without-indicators

MSC does not make use of pre-defined indicators, especially ones that have to be counted and measured.

The 'story' approach

The answers to the central question about change are often in the form of stories of who did what, when and why – and the reasons why the event was important (Dart 1999a, 1999b).

Monitoring

MSC was first developed as a means of monitoring changes in a development aid project (Davies, 1996). We think it can also be used for evaluation purposes.

Impact monitoring

Unlike traditional monitoring techniques that focus largely on monitoring activities and outputs, MSC focuses on monitoring intermediate outcomes and impact.

Evolutionary approach to organisational learning

This was the original name given to the technique by Rick. The name reflects the epistemology that informed the original design (see Chapter 7).

In 2000, we settled on the name ***Most Significant Change*** technique. This embodies one of the most fundamental aspects of the approach: the collection and systematic analysis of significant changes.

The MSC story

The most significant change (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. The program was run by the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB), a Bangladeshi non-government organisation, which in 1996 had over 500 staff and worked with more than 46,000 people in 785 villages. Approximately 80 per cent of the direct beneficiaries were women. The large scale and open-ended nature of the activities posed a major problem for the design of any system intended to monitor process and outcome (Davies, 1996).

Rick developed the MSC technique as part of the fieldwork for his PhD on organisational learning in non-government aid organisations (Davies, 1996). Both the thesis and MSC were informed by an evolutionary epistemology. While you don't need to know this background theory in order to use MSC, you can find out more about it in Chapter 7. It is also worth noting that Jess and others have analysed the use of MSC from different theoretical perspectives to that used by Rick. This flexibility is consistent with the underlying design of MSC.

More information on the history of the use of MSC, including Jess's role in its promotion in Australia, can be found in Chapter 8.

Bangladesh – five years later

"During the current year [2000], CCDB has carried on the Most Significant Change System (MSC) designed for identification and analysis of qualitative changes taking place in the lives of the reference people. This system has been part of the regular PPRDP monitoring system since August 1995. However, during the current plan period CCDB proposes to use the system in all other programs. The system appears to be very useful in monitoring the changing trends / impact of the programs, as the stories reflect concrete changes that have taken place in the lives of the reference people within a given time frame." ***(CCDB, 2000:4, Bangladesh)***

Overview of implementation steps

MSC is an emerging technique, and many adaptations have already been made that will be discussed throughout this Guide. Before getting into modifications, we present a comprehensive overview of what a 'full' implementation of MSC might look like. We have described this using ten steps.

1. How to start and raise interest
2. Defining the domains of change
3. Defining the reporting period
4. Collecting SC stories
5. Selecting the most significant of the stories
6. Feeding back the results of the selection process
7. Verification of stories
8. Quantification
9. Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring
10. Revising the system.

The first step in MSC generally involves introducing a range of stakeholders to MSC and fostering interest and commitment to participate. The next step is to 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. The third step is to decide how frequently to monitor changes taking place in these domains.

SC stories are collected from those most directly involved, such as participants and field staff. The stories are collected by asking a simple question such as: *'During the last month, in your opinion, what was the most significant change that took place for participants in the program?'* It is initially up to respondents to allocate their stories to a domain category. In addition to this, respondents are encouraged to report why they consider a particular change to be the most significant one.

The stories are then analysed and filtered up through the levels of authority typically found within an organisation or program. Each level of the hierarchy reviews a series of stories sent to them by the level below and selects the single most significant account of change within each of the domains. Each group then sends the selected stories up to the next level of the program hierarchy, and the number of stories is whittled down through a systematic and transparent process. Every time stories are selected, the criteria used to select them are recorded and fed back to all interested stakeholders, so that each subsequent round of story collection and selection is informed by feedback from previous rounds. The organisation is effectively recording and adjusting the direction of its attention – and the criteria it uses for valuing the events it sees there.

After this process has been used for some time, such as a year, a document is produced with all stories selected at the uppermost organisational level over that period in each domain of change. The stories are accompanied by the reasons the stories were selected. The program funders are asked to assess the stories in this document and select those that best represent the sort of outcomes they wish to fund. They are also asked to document the reasons for their choice. This information is fed back to project managers.

The selected stories can then be verified by visiting the sites where the described events took place. The purpose of this is two-fold: to check that stories have been reported

accurately and honestly, and to provide an opportunity to gather more detailed information about events seen as especially significant. If conducted some time after the event, a visit also offers a chance to see what has happened since the event was first documented.

The next step is quantification, which can take place at two stages. When an account of change is first described, it is possible to include quantitative information as well as qualitative information. It is also possible to quantify the extent to which the most significant changes identified in one location have taken place in other locations within a specific period. The next step after quantification is monitoring the monitoring system itself, which can include looking at who participated and how they affected the contents, and analysing how often different types of changes are reported. The final step is to revise the design of the MSC process to take into account what has been learned as a direct result of using it and from analysing its use.

The kernel

The kernel 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]?'

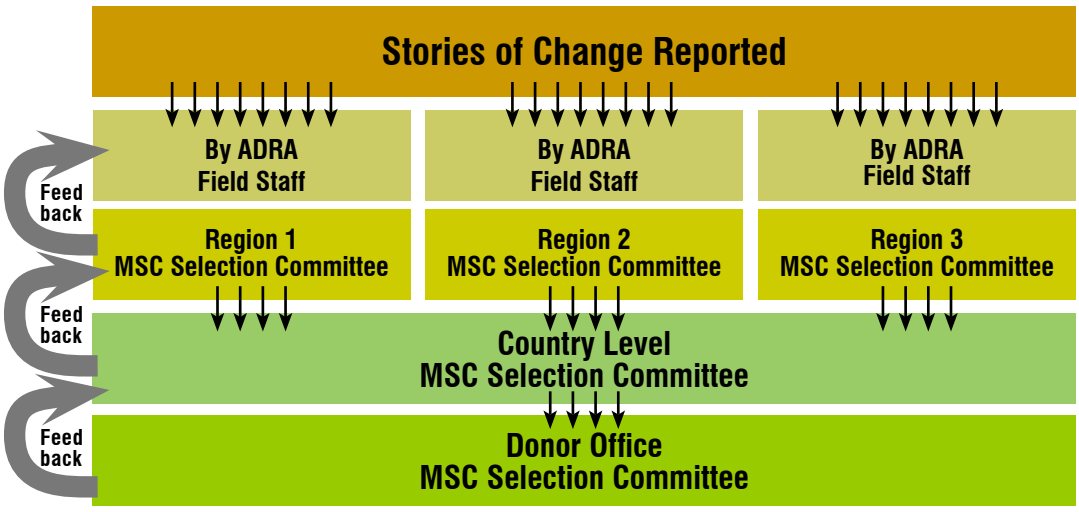
A similar question is posed when the answers to the first question are examined by another group of participants:

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

This process provides a simple means of making sense of a large amount of complex information collected from many participants across a range of settings.

Telling each level about the choice of significant changes made at the higher levels is an essential component of the whole process. This helps readjust the focus of searches for significant change in each subsequent reporting period.

Figure 1. The MSC selection process (example from ADRA Laos)



The purpose

There are several reasons why a wide range of organisations have found MSC monitoring very useful and these include the following.

1. It is a good means of identifying unexpected changes.
2. It is a good way to clearly identify the values that prevail in an organisation and to have a practical discussion about which of those values are the most important. This happens when people think through and discuss which of the SCs is the most significant. This can happen at all levels of the organisation.
3. It is a participatory form of monitoring that requires no special professional skills. Compared to other monitoring approaches, it is easy to communicate across cultures. There is no need to explain what an indicator is. Everyone can tell stories about events they think were important.
4. It encourages analysis as well as data collection because people have to explain why they believe one change is more important than another.
5. It can build staff capacity in analysing data and conceptualising impact.
6. It can deliver a rich picture of what is happening, rather than an overly simplified picture where organisational, social and economic developments are reduced to a single number.
7. It can be used to monitor and evaluate bottom-up initiatives that do not have predefined outcomes against which to evaluate.

Myanmar – senior staff hear results first-hand

"The senior staff were also fascinated by the stories which came up; they hardly ever get to hear these things!" ***(Gillian Fletcher, 2004, Advisor to CARE HIV / AIDS program)***

When and when not to use MSC

MSC is better suited to some program contexts than others. In a simple program with easily defined outcomes (such as vaccination, perhaps), quantitative monitoring may be 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
- large with numerous organisational layers

- 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).

Monitoring and evaluation in an organisation may serve several purposes. MSC addresses some purposes more than others. In our experience, MSC is suited to monitoring that focuses on **learning** rather than just accountability. It is also an appropriate tool when you are interested in the effect of the intervention on people's lives and keen to include the words of non-professionals. In addition, MSC can help staff to improve their capabilities in capturing and analysing the impact of their work.

There are also some instances where the benefits may not justify the cost of MSC. 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 (PR)
- conduct retrospective evaluation of a program that is complete
- understand the average experience of participants
- produce an evaluation report for accountability purposes
- complete a quick and cheap evaluation.

Some program contexts are more conducive to the successful implementation of MSC. In our experience, 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.

USA – using MSC for small, individualised programs

"… the services provided through this program are highly individualised. Families come to the program with very different needs and skills. We are charged with documenting the number of families that have made progress, but the definition of progress is different for each family. This makes it very difficult to use any kind of standardised measure of change. For all of these reasons we've begun investigating the MSC approach." *(Julie Rainey, 2001, Family Literacy Program)*

Where to get further information

The bibliography section of this Guide contains a range of references and suggestions for further reading.

For continuing access to information about MSC, including new usages and the experiences of existing users, you might like to join the Most Significant Changes mailing list at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/mostsignificantchanges. This was set up by Rick in 2000 and now has more than 200 members. The mailing list has a files section that contains information on MSC usage in a range of organisations and countries from 1993 to the present.

Learning about the past quickly – Fortune Magazine

"If you knew what was going to happen in advance every day you could do amazing things. You could become insanely wealthy, influence the political process et cetera. Well, it turns out that most people don't even know what happened yesterday in their own business. So, a lot of businesses are discovering they can take tremendous competitive advantage simply by finding out what happened yesterday as soon as possible." *(Steve Jobs, 1994:23)*

Chapter Two: **Ten Steps to Implementing MSC**

In this chapter, we discuss how to implement MSC using the following steps:

1. *Getting started: establishing champions and getting familiar with the approach*
2. *Establishing 'domains of change'*
3. *Defining the reporting period*
4. *Collecting stories of change*
5. *Reviewing the stories within the organisational hierarchy*
6. *Providing stakeholders with regular feedback about the review process*
7. *Setting in place a process to verify the stories if necessary*
8. *Quantification*
9. *Conducting secondary analysis of the stories en masse*
10. *Revising the MSC process.*

Before we elaborate on the individual steps, it is worth considering which steps are fundamental, and which are discretionary. We believe that out of the ten MSC steps, steps 4, 5 and 6 fundamentally define the process.

- collection of SC stories (Step 4)
- selection of the most significant of these stories by at least one group of stakeholders (Step 5)
- feedback to relevant stakeholders concerning which SC stories were selected and why they were selected (Step 6).

Whether the other steps are included will depend on the organisational context and purpose for implementing MSC.

Step 1: How to start and raise interest

Getting started is perhaps the most daunting step. People may be sceptical about the validity of the technique and fear that it will take too much time.

It often takes an enthusiastic individual or small group to raise interest in MSC. This can involve visiting key people and groups and showing them the methodology. It can often help to present stories from other programs and to show example reports. The message to be conveyed is that MSC is simple and straightforward to implement. Many practitioners will not need to understand the theory behind MSC.

If you want to raise interest in MSC, you need to be clear about the purpose of MSC and the role it will play in your organisation (see Chapter 4). We emphasise that MSC is not a stand-alone technique for monitoring and evaluation (see Chapter 6).

For potential MSC adopters and users who want to know more about the theory, Chapter 7 sets out the underlying ideas and explains how and why the MSC approach differs from other approaches.

Metaphors for explaining the approach

If you are the person attempting to initiate the adoption of MSC, it may help to use a metaphor to explain it. These are our favourites.

Newspaper

A newspaper does not summarise yesterday's important events via pages and pages of 'indicators' (though they can be found in some sections) but by using news stories about interesting events. Papers are structured into different subject areas (foreign news, domestic news, financial news, sport, leisure) in the same way that MSC uses domains. The most important stories go on the front page and the most important of these is usually at the top of the front page.

School of fish

A social change program has numerous practitioners (fish) swimming in slightly different directions, each with individual values but a common goal. MSC helps the individual fish to communicate with each other: '*Where do we really want to go? Should we swim away from the sharks and towards a safe place to lay our eggs or first head for food?*' MSC uses communication to help all the fish swim in roughly the same direction, away from what is not good and towards what is good. It helps them swim as a school towards a commonly valued destination.

Another related metaphor is of the organisation as ***an amoeba***, extending in directions where it wants to go, and withdrawing from areas it does not like, all on the basis of the signals being received from its surrounding environment.

Holiday memories

What do you remember from an overseas holiday? Do you remember the average things or the wonderful and terrible things? MSC helps teams of people focus on the memorable events and uses these events to help realign effort towards achieving more of the wonderful things and less of the terrible things. When the focus is on learning, we need to capture more than just the average experiences.

Restaurant menu

MSC does not present one version of what is happening but a series of glimpses of what a program is achieving. Stakeholders can select from these glimpses in much the same way as they would select food from a restaurant menu. Choices are based on individual preferences. In the MSC restaurant, you are asked to try and articulate the reasons for your choice. Because the restaurant has a very responsive chef, the choices your table makes will encourage the chef to present a revised menu to the next groups of customers.

Getting familiar with the approach

Another really important lesson we have learned from experience is to start small. It is a risky exercise to implement a huge and complicated MSC system without first piloting it on a smaller scale. Every organisational context is different, and MSC will have to be moulded to your particular organisation. It pays to conduct a pilot to find out what works and what does not work.

When piloting MSC, try to begin with the people and sections of your organisation that are most interested and enthusiastic about its potential.

Role of champions

Once the pilot is complete and there is sufficient interest, start working out where MSC might best fit in your organisation. Even in these early stages, it is worth identifying key people who are excited by MSC and could champion the technique and act as catalysts in the process. These people can be involved in designing how to implement MSC across the organisation. They will need a greater understanding of MSC so they can respond to the questions that will inevitably arise.

These champions can:

- excite and motivate people
- answer questions about the technique
- facilitate selection of SC stories
- encourage people to collect SC stories
- ensure that feedback occurs
- ensure that the stories are collected and organised and sent to review meetings
- develop protocols to ensure confidentiality where necessary.

Pacific Islands – gaining donor acceptance

"In preparing the M&E framework, IDSS followed best practice, meeting donor requirements. With compliance met, the MSC approach was proposed as an additional element beyond the requirements of AusAID … IDSS expects that such support would not have been forthcoming if the MSC had been proposed as a replacement to the conventional logframe based approach. Based on a year of implementation AusAID was also in a position to measure IDSS' capacity and intent to deliver the Program in accordance with its approach." ***(Keren Winterford, 2003, IDSS)***

Step 2: Defining domains of change

What are domains of change?

Domains are broad and often fuzzy categories of possible SC stories. In CCDB, participants in MSC were asked to look for significant changes in four domains:

- changes in the quality of people's lives
- changes in the nature of people's participation in development activities
- changes in the sustainability of people's organisations and activities
- any other changes.

A domain of change is not an indicator. Good indicators are supposed to be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound). Indicators must be defined so that everyone interprets them in the same way. Domains of change, on the other hand, are deliberately fuzzy to allow people to have different interpretations of what constitutes a change in that area.

How to use domains

Using domains of change has immediate practical value. It helps organisations to group a large number of SC stories into more manageable lots, which can each be analysed in turn. A benefit of determining the domains in advance is that they can provide some guidance to the people collecting stories concerning the kind of changes they need to be searching for without being too prescriptive.

A second reason to use predetermined domains is that many organisations want to use MSC to help track whether they are making progress towards their stated objectives. For example, CCDB wanted poor communities in Bangladesh to become less poor (i.e. improved quality of life), to actively participate in development activities in their communities, and for those activities and supporting organisations to be sustainable. But because CCDB believed each local community should individually define these goals in more detail, they did not want to monitor these developments using very specific indicators of change that might not apply to all communities. So they adopted three general categories of change (domains) associated with the quality of people's lives, the nature of people's participation and the sustainability of people's organisations and activities.

The 'open window' domain

Where organisations use domains to track different types of changes, the 'any other type of change' domain is a useful open category that allows participants to report significant changes that don't fit into the named domains. This gives SC story collectors more freedom to focus on things that they think are relevant – in their own context.

Negative changes

One choice facing organisations implementing MSC is whether to have a domain that explicitly focuses on significant negative changes. Our experience suggests that 90 to 95 per cent of SC stories within these types of domains tend to be about positive changes. However, this figure varies according to how clearly those in charge signal that negative as well as positive changes should be reported. It also depends on the extent to which negative changes, once reported, are then acknowledged and responded to positively.

Some organisations have set up a domain specifically for negative stories, thus creating an explicit demand. In the case of Target 10, a major dairy industry extension program in Victoria, Australia, this extra domain was called 'lessons learned'. This put a positive spin on the existence of negative changes and emphasised the need to extract value from such events. ADRA Laos took a similar approach, using an extra domain called 'changes that reflect an area to improve (negative)'.

Types of domains

Many MSC users have focused on changes in the lives of **individuals**. In some cases this was because individuals were the focus of the program's over-arching objectives. Another reason is because focusing on people's lives overcomes the problem of quantitative and indicator-based monitoring systems that focus on activities and outputs.

However, some users of MSC, including CCDB, have used domains that focus on more than one unit of analysis, i.e. on more than individuals. CCDB asked about significant changes in the sustainability of people's **institutions** and MS Denmark asked about **organisational** performance. Others, such as the Landcare support program in Australia, have included domains that focus on changes in whole **communities** or in **policy**. Oxfam New Zealand asked about changes in **partnerships**. Most of these are people-centred domains, which we believe are more likely to be understood by participants than those domains that focus on abstract processes.

Mozambique – difficulty with conceptual domains:
"Some domains are more easily grasped than others … For example, it was difficult to explain the domain of 'Intercultural Cooperation'. In Mozambique it often did not ring any bells. This was a bit surprising since MS runs a personnel program positioning Danes with the partner. One declared aim is to stimulate cooperation across borders …" ***(Peter Sigsgaard, 2002:10)***

How many domains should be used?

In our experience, between three and five domains is a manageable number. The limiting factor is how much time participants are willing to spend in discussing each domain. Participants may find the process too time-consuming if it takes more than two hours to review changes in all the domains in any one meeting.

Are domains essential?

Domains are not essential. MSC stories can be collected and analysed as a group (see Step 5 below) without first being categorised into domains. Participants can be asked to go out and look for significant changes without being given guidance in the form of specific domains of concern. With smaller organisations where there are likely to be fewer SC stories to examine, the MSC approach will probably be easier without domains.

In organisations such as VSO, field staff are asked to identify and document MSC stories of any kind. It is only when the stories reach the country office level that they are categorised into domains that are of concern to the country office and to VSO headquarters in UK.

Letting middle and upper level staff within an organisation categorise MSC stories into domains produces some incidental benefits. If the domains are focused on organisational objectives, then the sorting decisions tell the rest of the organisation how those staff interpret the meaning of those objectives.

Gujarat – classification brings debate

"In these meetings, the changes noticed were classified under three headings and sent up to the HQ level. In the whole exercise the cluster staff participated with great enthusiasm and debates ensued with regards to classification of changes." ***(Barry Underwood, 1996, AKRSP)***

At the field level, especially where program participants are involved in identifying and selecting MSC stories, it may be useful to start without specifying domains. Instead, see what sort of stories are generated and valued by the beneficiaries, and then divide these into appropriate domains or have the beneficiaries do so. The choice depends on the extent to which the organisation using MSC wants to be led by its participants rather than its own objectives.

South Australia – deciding not to set predetermined domains

"One of the early debates we had had in our attempts to interpret the process was whether or not the domains of change should be imposed to match the needs of the project for particular kinds of evidence for accountability purposes (as they were in Davies' work in Bangladesh). Because we wanted to prioritise the learning inherent in the process, we decided that participants would find the domains more meaningful if they were arrived at by participants in each of the three Learning Circles based on their experiences of significant change through involvement in the Project." ***(Rosie Le Cornu and others, 2003)***

What should domains focus on?

One question that often arises is whether the domains of change should only be about changes caused by the organisation that is using MSC, or include changes caused by other people, organisations or influences in general. For example, increased participation by individuals could result from changes in government legislation relating to the right to free

association rather than anything to do with the organisation's own activities. Nevertheless, in most societies, such changes would be considered significant.

In practice, most users of MSC have focused on changes that are a direct or indirect result of what their organisations are doing. There is, however, an argument for saying that many organisations already see the world too narrowly, and that it would be healthy to identify SCs arising from any cause.

These options do not need to be mutually exclusive. It should be possible to track both types of changes through the one application of MSC. One or more domains could be about changes caused by the organisation's work, while another could ask specifically about changes not caused or influenced by the organisation.

Doing so would help provide what Chris Roche (1999) has described as a 'project out' and a 'context in' perspective.

Oxfam CAA – lessons from impact assessments

"Related to these specific findings was the broad observation that even the most successful community development programs should be aware of the context in which they are situated ... For example, a group of waste-picker women who had enormous success in empowerment that led to significant changes to their working and living conditions, were having their livelihoods threatened by a proposed privatisation of waste management in their city. This change in urban waste management policy had the potential to undermine the strong empowerment results that had been achieved. A broader advocacy campaign on waste management may be required to address the rights of these women." ***(Linda Kelly, Patrick Kilby, Nalini Kasynathan, 2004)***

Who should be involved in determining domains?

In some organisations, existing commitments to the pursuit of specific objectives are likely to lead to the use of domains based on program objectives. Hopefully they will already be well-known and owned by the staff and clients. Where there is more freedom to select the domains, using a participatory process to identify appropriate domains is likely to encourage all participants to take a more active interest in the MSC process and its products.

Different techniques for developing domains

Domains can be identified by a top-down or bottom-up process, i.e. by the senior managers of an organisation or by its beneficiaries, or though a wider process encompassing other stakeholders as well. In the case of CCDB, the four domains were identified by Rick through consultations among the five most senior staff. In the case of Target 10, Jess used the Delphi technique[1] to identify four domains of change through consultations with 150 program stakeholders The Delphi technique is a form of interactive (postal) surveying that utilises an iterative questionnaire and feedback approach to provide participants with an opportunity to revise earlier views based on the responses of other participants until some desired level of consensus is reached.

1. See "Prioritization Process Using Delphi Technique" by Alan Cline at http://www.carolla.com/wp-delph.htm

Victoria: a bottom-up approach for developing domains

"In Landcare in the North Central Region of Victoria, Australia, over 140 SC stories were collected without domains through an interview process. These stories were then screened by a steering committee that had been set up for this process. This group firstly eliminated any stories that were not about change, or had insufficient detail. They then categorised the remaining stories into piles of similar outcomes (domains). We ended up with seven domains of change." ***(Jess Dart, observations made in 2004)***

Domains can be identified before SC stories are collected or afterwards by sorting SC stories into meaningful groups (see above). This depends on the extent to which the organisation wants to be open to new experiences rather than continuing to be guided by past experiences.

Any documentation about the MSC process and its products should explain, albeit briefly, how the domains were selected. This helps other people reading about the results to put them in context.

Step 3: Defining the reporting period

Most applications of MSC have been as a form of **monitoring**. Monitoring involves periodic collection of information, but the frequency of monitoring varies across programs and organisations. The same applies with uses of MSC. The frequency of collection of SC stories has varied from fortnightly to yearly. The most common frequency has probably been three-monthly, coinciding with the prevalence of quarterly reporting in many organisations.

Low frequency reporting, such as the yearly reporting used by VSO, runs the risk of staff and project participants both forgetting how the MSC process works, or why it is being used. At the very least it means there is likely to be a slow process of learning how to use MSC, and an equally slow process of organisational learning that is being stimulated by MSC. On the other hand, a yearly cycle might require less time and resources and may be appropriate in certain contexts.

With higher frequency reporting, all the participants in the MSC process are likely to learn more quickly how to best use the process. However, frequent reporting will soon lead to the exhaustion of known cases of longer-term significant change and a focus on the shorter-term significant changes that can be identified. Frequent reporting will also increase the cost of the process, in terms of the amount of participants' time taken up by the process.

Each organisation using MSC has to make its own decision about the most appropriate reporting period, balancing the costs and benefits involved, and taking into account the reporting gaps that any existing M&E systems may be ignoring.

Our experience suggests that organisations tend to start MSC with more regular reporting and decrease the frequency as the process continues. In the Bangladesh (CCDB) case, SC stories were selected every two weeks for the first two months. This was followed by monthly selection, which was changed to three-monthly at the end of the first two years. In the Victorian case (Target 10), the initial monthly selection process eventually evolved into a three-monthly selection.

When you first introduce the MSC process, there may be a whole backlog of SC stories that people are keen to document. As implementation proceeds, these historical stories are exhausted and subsequent SC stories tend to refer to more recent events. This change may be accompanied by a decrease in the quantity of stories that are generated.

Ghana – the need for current stories

"… there was a varying time-delay between the writing of the stories and their review, which sometimes meant that the immediacy of some of the changes was lost. As the stories had often already been captured in quarterly reports, they seemed rather stale when reviewed for the purposes of this exercise." ***(Johnston, 2002)***

Step 4: Collecting SC stories

Eliciting SC stories

The central part of MSC is an open question to participants, such as:

> *'Looking back over the last month, what do you think was the most significant change in the quality of people's lives in this community?'*

This example is taken from CCDB, which was the first organisation to use MSC monitoring, in Rajshahi, Bangladesh, in 1994. The question has six parts:

1. ***'Looking back over the last month…'*** – It refers to a specific time period.
2. ***'…what do you think was...'*** – It asks respondents to exercise their own judgment.
3. ***'…the most significant…'*** – It asks respondents to be selective, not to try to comment on everything, but to focus in and report on one thing.
4. ***'…change…'*** – It asks respondents to be more selective, to report a change rather than static aspects of the situation or something that was present in the previous reporting period.
5. ***'…in the quality of people's lives…'*** – It asks respondents to be even more selective, not to report just any change but a change in the quality of people's lives. This tag describes a domain of change and can be modified to fit other domains of change. For example, another one of CCDB's MSC questions referred to a change 'in people's participation'.
6. ***'…in this community?'*** – Like the first part of the sentence, this establishes some boundaries. In this particular case we are not asking about people's lives in New York or Alaska, but in Rajshahi. This part can also be adjusted.

How to capture SC stories

There are several ways in which SC stories can be identified, then documented. The choice of method depends in part on how actively the organisation wants to search for new SC stories, versus its need to tap into the existing knowledge of its field workers through retrospective inquiry. Active searching is likely to be more demanding in terms of the amount of the participant's time that is required, unless their time is already available via existing processes of stakeholder participation (see below). Active searching through purposive interviews also runs the risk of producing 'expected' accounts of change by the respondents.

Fieldworkers write down unsolicited stories that they have heard

In this case, fieldworkers document unsolicited stories they have heard in the course of their work. This technique was used in the CCBD example. The implicit assumption here was that good CCDB fieldworkers should come to learn about change stories in the normal course of their work because they have daily and close contact with their beneficiaries. If they cannot find such SC stories this itself may signal something about the quality of their work. Here MSC is incidentally monitoring the staff as well as the lives of the organisation's beneficiaries (see the section on meta-monitoring below)

By interview and note-taking

Some organisations encourage nominated people to 'interview' beneficiaries and write 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. 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 as provided in **Appendix 2**. 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. Stories may also be captured using a tape recorder and then transcribed. This proactive method of identifying SC stories may be especially useful when MSC is being used for evaluation rather than monitoring processes (see Chapter 7).

During group discussion

Rather than having one person interviewing another, a group of people can share their SC stories. In the case of Target 10, sharing stories at committee meetings often triggered additional stories from other farmer stakeholders who were present. It is a very human thing to respond to a story with a second one! For this reason, a tape recorder was used at these meetings to record spontaneous SC stories. This can be a very fruitful and enjoyable way of collecting stories. Stories collected in a group situation can also be documented using pen and paper.

The beneficiary writes the story directly

Another technique is for beneficiaries to document their own stories. On several occasions in the Target 10 program, farmers brought pre-written stories to meetings. However, it was more common for farmers to come with the stories in their minds – to be documented during the meeting. As with the use of group discussion, the use of this method depends on the presence of a pre-existing mechanism for stakeholder involvement in the monitoring process.

Nicaragua – testimonies rather than stories
"In English the used term is story, which means cuento or historia in Spanish. In both Spanish and English the term implies a sense of something invented, it is more associated with fiction than reality, which can cause confusion in the application of the MSC method. People could try to invent a story illustrating the change that the interviewer is seeking instead of a story from real life. For that reason I decided to use the term testimony/narrative, because it implies a sense of an experienced event from real life." (*Gill Holmes, Lisbeth Petersen, Karsten Kirkegaard, Ibis Denmark, 2003)*

What information should be documented?

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. For example, a woman may tell a story about going to a community meeting and sitting at the back and asking a question. 'So what?' you may think. She then tells you that this story was significant because she had not previously had the confidence to go to a community meeting, and that the program helped her gain the confidence to express her views in front of the village elders for the first time.

Optional things to document

A useful addition to an SC story is a headline or title similar to what might be used in a newspaper article. This can be a convenient handle for participants to use to refer to the story when comparing it to others. It can also help the writer distil and communicate the essence of what happened.

In the case of CCDB, the question *'Why is this significant to you?'* was followed by an additional question *'What difference has this made now or will it make in the future?'*

Asking at the end of the story about recommendations or lessons learned can help to draw out the implications of the story. Responses to these additional questions can be placed in the section that describes the significance of the story.

How long should the stories be?

Most MSC stories we have seen are a page or less in length, with some being up to two pages. Shorter MSC stories are quicker and easier to read, but they should not be so short that vital information is left out. Different organisations tend to favour different lengths of stories, depending on their culture. Some organisations value short and to-the-point accounts of change, while others favour epic accounts told in an engaging manner. The selection process will favour stories that fit with organisational values, and this is to be encouraged as long as the stories are detailed enough to allow for some verification.

Reporting forms

Several organisations have developed standard formats for documenting stories. Some examples are provided in the Appendices. This helps to ensure that important details are not omitted. However, it is important that the form is not too complex. The more complex the form, the harder it is to motivate people to use and appreciate MSC. The essence of the technique is to ask a couple of simple open-ended questions – you do not require a structured questionnaire.

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.

Fortunately, even when people tell stories that are hazy, incomplete or totally off the track, the process self-improves through repeated practice, selection and feedback. If you do

encounter a hazy story, you could choose not to select that story and advise storytellers that stories need to be more specific. This will give storytellers a better idea of what is required. In this way the stories can become clearer and more focused with every round of collection and feedback.

Papua New Guinea – whose voices?

"Papua New Guinean culture is an oral culture, and most Papua New Guineans are far more comfortable with verbal expression than they are with written expression. If such stories are to be treated seriously and the cultural environment respected, then every effort must be made to ensure that the authentic narrative voice of the speaker is preserved. When an English (or Australian) speaker transcribes a story told by a Papua New Guinean, it can easily lose that authenticity of voice, unless great effort is made to ensure literal and exact transcription. Similarly, the use of forms with sections (for examples see Rowlands 2002; Dart and Davies 2003) or any but the lightest possible editing can skew the storytelling." ***(Elizabeth Reid, December 2004)***

Whose stories to collect?

Deciding which people to ask to tell SC stories depends on the organisational context and the subject matter of the domains. For example, for a domain concerning changes in people's lives, appropriate people to ask for stories would be the beneficiaries themselves, or the people who interact with them, such as grassroots workers.

However, for a domain about 'changes in partnerships and networks with other NGOs', the best storytellers are likely to be program staff and staff from partner organisations who are in a position to comment.

The context of the project or program will also affect whose stories should be collected. If the organisation is community-based and accountable to donors, it may be most appropriate for their members to run the MSC process themselves, i.e. to share SC stories, select the most significant ones and document them along with the reasons for their choice.

Experience suggests that stories narrated by beneficiaries are especially valuable but are often the most difficult to elicit. Ideally, beneficiary groups would be trained in sharing and selecting SC stories, and would report their selected story along with the reasons for their choice. However, in some contexts this is not practical, and the storytellers by default will be the fieldworkers. (See Step 6 for a discussion about the benefits and risks of having beneficiaries involved in the feedback process.)

Even when the stories are to come directly from the communities, it often helps to start off by first collecting stories from fieldworkers. This helps to ensure that staff understand the process before introducing it to others.

Individual stories versus situational stories

We are often asked whether situational or group stories are permitted in MSC. A situational story describes a change in a community or group, rather than being focused on an individual. Any form of SC story is permissible in MSC. The choice will depend on what the organisation using MSC is looking for: individual changes, group changes or institutional changes. These options were discussed in Step 2 above in connection with choice of

domains. Because beneficiaries may not be aware of changes that are occurring in more than one location, it is useful to also seek stories from field staff as well.

In one UK aid organisation, middle-level managers were allowed to submit their own SC stories, which could be about larger scale and program-level changes. After a review, however, it was realised that these staff tended to use the MSC process as just another reporting channel. They wrote the same way as they did in their normal reports and did not describe or explain any significant events in detail, preferring to offer bullet points and general discussions of changes taking place. The lesson from this is that those who are closest to where the changes are occurring or intimately involved in the program are more likely to be able to narrate useful stories that tell us things we don't already know.

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. 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.

It is also worth noting that in some countries, including Australia, children under a certain age cannot be interviewed without parental consent.

If a storyteller believes that their story is only going to be used for monitoring and evaluation purposes, it would be unethical to publish the story in the local paper without consulting the storyteller. Even when consent has been given, it is good practice to check with storytellers before placing any stories in external media such as newspapers.

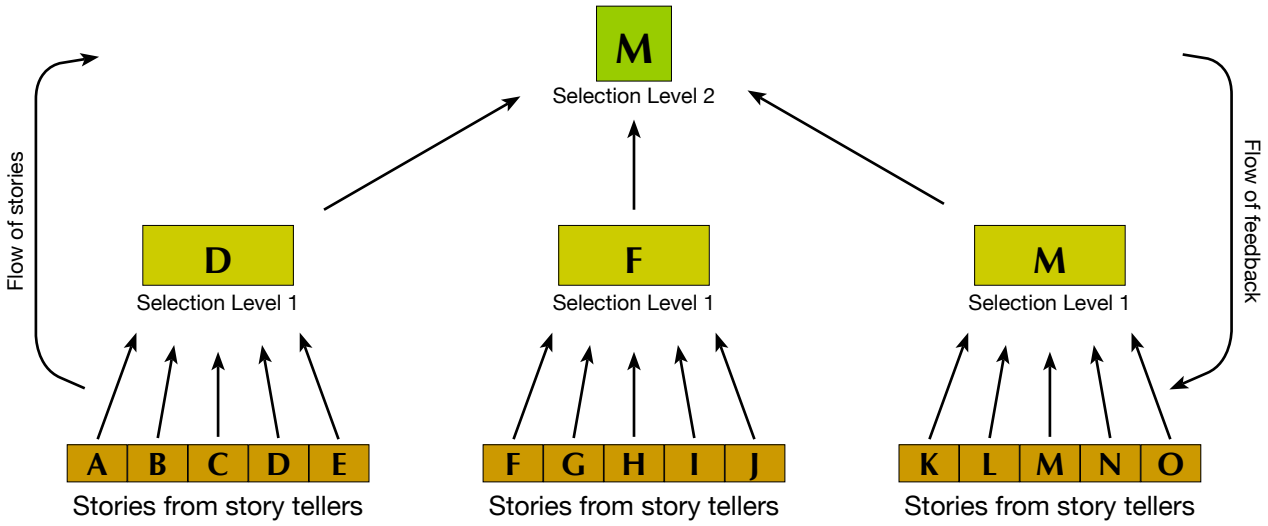
One way of making sure that ethical considerations are observed is to have a 'tick box' on the reporting form to prompt the person recording a story to ask for the consent of the storyteller. **Appendix 2** gives an example.

Step 5: Selecting the most significant of the stories

The MSC approach uses a hierarchy of selection processes. 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. The diagram below (Figure 2) illustrates this process.

The iterative process of selecting and then pooling SC stories helps reduce a large volume of locally important stories down to a small number of more widely valued stories. The use of multiple levels of selection enables this to happen without burdening any individual or group with too much work. The process has been called 'summary by selection'.

Figure 2. Flow of stories and feedback in MSC



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. Another way is to set up specific structures for selecting SCs.

Most organisations have a hierarchical structure with lots of field staff and one chief executive. It makes practical sense to use this existing organisational structure to organise the selection process. SC stories can be examined in the course of meetings already scheduled for related purposes (such as quarterly and annual review meetings held in local and head offices) rather than having to plan special events specifically for the analysis of SC stories. This also helps ensure that staff at all levels of the organisation are involved in analysing SC stories. MSC can also make use of pre-existing mechanisms for engaging with other stakeholders. For example, the Target 10 MSC process used the pre-existing stakeholder steering committees at regional and statewide levels.

A second reason for using existing structures is that the process of selecting SC stories can help reveal the values of those within the organisation's authority structure and open these up to discussion and change.

On the other hand, creating new structures for selecting SC stories can be useful where a broader perspective is needed, or where the perspectives of different stakeholder groups need to be highlighted. VSO brought senior staff members from different sections (e.g. marketing, finance, programs) together in a single SC selection group. In CCDB, the annual roundtable meeting with donors made use of five different SC selection groups representing beneficiaries, junior staff, senior staff and two donor groups.

Before planning a complex SC selection process, we urge you to trial the technique in a small way. Once you have trialled the technique and are ready to design an organisation-wide structure, there are several things you may need to consider.

- How many levels of selection will there be above the field staff who initially document the SC stories? This usually depends on the number of layers of management that already exist within the organisation.

- At each of these levels, how many separate selection processes will there be? This will depend on the number of separate offices at each level (based on location or specialisation).
- In each of these levels, how many SC stories can be managed by the staff involved? It is unrealistic to expect staff to meet and work on the selection of SC stories for more than two hours at the most. If there are four domains of change to review, this means 30 minutes for each. Within each domain, aim to read through and discuss no more than 10 SC stories.
- Who should participate in each selection process? This aspect is covered in more detail below.
- How often should selection occur? Normally this choice would be dependent on the frequency with which SC are collected (see Step 3).

While the initial SC stories might be identified by individual fieldworkers, the selection processes at each level in the hierarchy normally involve groups of people, not individuals. The selection process should involve open debate rather than solitary decision-making.

Who should be involved in the selection process?

At a minimum, it should be people with line management responsibilities in relation to the people who have forwarded the SC stories. It would be preferable to also include people with advisory responsibilities in relation to the same staff as well as others who would normally make use of information coming from the people who forwarded the stories. The uppermost level would ideally involve donors, investors and other stakeholder representatives.

Although there are many reasons to involve beneficiaries in the selection and feedback process, there are also some risks to be considered. Firstly, beneficiaries' time may not be paid for in the same way as field staff and so asking beneficiaries to collect and select stories could be seen as an unethical imposition.

It is also worth considering which field staff to involve in the selection process. Things can become uncomfortable when field staff are involved in selecting stories written largely

by themselves. Selection appears to be easier when the stories have been written by different people. The acceptability of self-selection seems to depend on the culture of the organisation. When in doubt, it may be better to design a structure so that most of the SC stories are selected by people other than those who wrote them.

In some cases, including CCDB, the people involved in documenting SC stories have also been involved in the subsequent selection process at the district level, along with their managers. But at the Dhaka level, the next level up, only the senior staff were involved in the selection process.

Ghana – discomfort with story selection

"The discussion of the stories in a forum including the authors of the stories proved in some ways uncomfortable. It appeared that the Facilitators' work (or the effectiveness of their input to their district) was on trial. However we tried to overcome this discomfort, and with whatever humour the exercise was carried out, it was never adequately dealt with. It seems unfair to ask the authors of the stories to step back from their own perceptions and look at all the stories from a broader perspective to identify what is most significant for the project rather than for their own context. This became particularly awkward when the selection team was smaller and the authors were forced either to 'lobby' for their own stories or be generous to colleagues and appear to let their own district down!" ***(Johnston, 2002:8)***

How to select stories

Story selection usually involves a group of people sitting down together with a pile of documented stories that may or may not be assigned to domains. The task is to reduce the pile of stories to one per domain. For each domain the group will select a story that they believe represents the most significant change of all. If the stories have not been assigned to domains, this is the one of the first jobs to be done.

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 allocated to domains, then all the stories from one domain are considered together. Various facilitated and unfacilitated processes can be used to help groups choose the most significant of the stories. Then the reasons for the choice are documented. We encourage you to experiment with different selection processes to find what best suits your cultural context.

While various processes can be used, the key ingredients to story selection are:

- everybody reads the stories
- the group holds an in-depth conversation about which stories should be chosen
- the group decides which stories are felt to be most significant
- the reasons for the group's choice(s) are documented.

Criteria for selecting SCs

One choice that must be made is whether to identify criteria for selecting stories before or after reading them. If the criteria are agreed beforehand, the process of learning (via selection of SCs) will be significantly influenced by what the organisation already thinks it knows. When the selection criteria are not discussed until after the stories have been read, the process becomes much more open to new experiences. Personal preferences may also be relevant. People vary in their degree of personal comfort about making judgments with or without predefined criteria. Although there is a choice here, we believe that if MSC is being used to aid organisational learning, the selection criteria should not be decided in advance but should emerge through discussion of the reported changes.

There are several ways of reaching a decision about which stories to select.

Majority rules

A simple way of coming to a decision is to read the stories, make sure everyone understands them, and then vote by show of hands. The main risk is that a choice will be made without any substantial discussion. Arguments about the merits of different SCs are important because they help to reveal the values and assumptions behind people's choices. Only when this is done can participants make more informed choices about what is really of value.

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 dissenting 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.

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.

Pre-scoring then a group vote

This method is suitable for groups who are short of meeting time. Prior to the meeting, participants are asked to read SC stories and rate their significance. These ratings are summarised in a table and presented to the participants when they meet face-to-face. Participants discuss the scores and cast their votes. Prior scoring ensures that participants have read the stories before the meeting, and can lead to a shorter and more focused group discussion at the meeting. The disadvantage is that all stories must be sent to participants some time before the meeting.

Secret ballot

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 choices. 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.

To facilitate or not?

Facilitation can speed up the story-selection process and ensure equal participation by group members. In some situations, an outside facilitator can be very useful. In the Target 10 implementation of MSC, all the story sessions were run by trained facilitators. The facilitation process used by Target 10 is described in Appendix 4.

It might not always be possible or appropriate to facilitate story selection. In small, informal groups, it may not be necessary.

Documenting the results of the selection process

The reasons for selecting an SC story as the most significant should be documented and attached to the story following the explanations given by people who initially documented the story. The SC and the explanations for its selection are then sent on to the next level of the selection process, if there is one. The results of the selection process should also be fed back to all the people who provided SCs for review. Explanations that are not attached to the stories they apply to will make less sense to the reader.

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 selection of a story, these should be listed along with an explanation of their relative importance.

Myanmar – forgetting to record the reasons for selection

"I had asked senior staff to sit with the small groups when they read the stories and discussed their significance, but there were very few notes / feedback from the senior staff on this; they got too caught up in listening to the stories to be able to step back and identify values." ***(Gillian Fletcher, 2004 (Advisor to CARE HIV/AIDS program)***

The documentation attached to the most significant SC story should also record the process used to select the story. This will provide other users of the SC stories with important contextual knowledge, and explain the origin of the SC they are reading.

What happens to the stories that are filtered out?

Stories that are filtered out should not be thrown away. They should be kept on file so that they are accessible to others within the organisation using MSC, for as long as they continue to use MSC, and arguably even for a while after that. This is to enable some systematic content analysis of the full set of documented SC stories. See Step 9 in this chapter.

It is also worth noting that the SC stories that are not selected at higher levels in the organisation still have some local value. Each story is important to the person who originally documented it, and possibly to others at higher levels even though it was finally decided that a different SC was more significant. It may be worthwhile following up all such stories later on to see how they were used, or whether they had any influence on what people did. This is discussed in Step 6.

Step 6: Feeding back the results of the selection process

The role of feedback in MSC

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. It would also help to provide information on how the selection process was organised. In some cases, including CCDB, participants provided more comprehensive feedback in the form of tables showing who gave which rating to what SC story.

There are several reasons why feedback is useful. The most important of these is that information about which SC stories were selected can aid participants' searches for SCs in the next reporting period. Knowing that a particular type of change is valued can lead to further searches for similar changes in that area. The focus of the search can move to where

it seems to be most needed. 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 is significant change.

Ibis Denmark – feedback or downward accountability?

In an MSC training workshop in October 2004, an Ibis staff member commented "Downward accountability is called feedback – you are lucky if you can get it". Perhaps one way to address this problem more directly would be to rename this stage in the MSC implementation process "Downward Accountability", to create and assert rights to knowledge about decisions (about MSC) made by others, rather than treating "feedback" almost as an optional item. ***(Rick Davies, 2004)***

Different ways to provide feedback

Feedback can be provided verbally or via email, newsletters and formal reports. In the CCBD case, formal reports were provided after each selection meeting. In Target 10, feedback was provided verbally at the regional level and by email to the program team; a formal report produced after one year included funders' feedback. Some MSC users have placed the selected stories and the reasons for their choice in community newsletters circulated to all participants. The results of the selection process could also be disseminated via CD-ROM, the Internet or by means of artistic activities such as pictures, videos or dramatic re-enactment.

Benefits of feedback to the community

Placing feedback in wider forums such as community newsletters produces a range of benefits. People can be motivated by reading stories of success and participants can gain ideas about how they may reach their goals. As a form of celebration for what has been achieved, it can lift the morale of staff and participants. It can also make the process more transparent, especially if the stories in the newsletters are accompanied by the reasons that these SC stories were selected.

Risks of giving feedback to the community

While fieldworkers have an obligation to try to achieve the stated objectives of a program, beneficiaries may not. Giving feedback to the community about which changes the program team does and does not value might be interpreted as the program trying to tell individuals and communities how they should develop.

One way of overcoming this risk is to involve some beneficiaries in selecting the final stories. Then the feedback about selected stories will come from beneficiary representatives as well as program staff. For example, in the CCDB case, alongside the panel of funders who selected the 'winning' stories was a panel of beneficiaries who examined the same stories and selected what they felt to be the most significant changes. The two panels then exchanged their choices. In a similar way in the Target 10 case, a panel of farmers selected stories in parallel with the funders.

Step 7: Verification of stories

Why verify?

In the right context, verification can be very useful. There is always a risk, especially in larger organisations, that the reported changes may not reflect what has actually happened, but instead:

- be deliberate fictional accounts, designed to save time or gain recognition
- describe real events that have been misunderstood
- exaggerate the significance of events.

A reported change may be even more important than is initially evident from the way in which the change was documented. Important details and wider implications may lie hidden until further investigation of the reported event.

When participants know that there are procedures for verifying SC stories, this can have several consequences. Contributors of SCs are more likely to be careful about the way they document their SCs and this can help improve the overall quality of the SCs. The existence of a verification process may also give external parties more confidence in the significance of the findings of the MSC approach.

On the other hand, undertaking some verification of SC stories may have negative consequences if not managed properly. Participants may feel they are not trusted, and may be discouraged from reporting anything other than what they think is expected. It may be useful to describe follow-up inquiries as 'exploration' or another less-threatening term. Using the newspaper metaphor to explain the MSC approach; follow-up inquiries can be explained in terms of doing a 'feature article' on the most significant news story of the week (month, quarter).

Choosing not to verify

Verification may be unnecessary in some instances. When stories are selected, they are vetted to some degree for accuracy by those who selected them. Where most of the people selecting the stories have background knowledge of the events described in the stories, it may be sufficient to accept their 'vetting' as verification. This situation might arise in small-scale projects or in larger programs where the beneficiaries are represented in the selection process.

Who verifies the stories?

It is in the interests of whoever selects a SC story as the most significant to make sure they feel confident with the accuracy of both the SC story and the interpretations made of it. Their judgments will normally be included in the documentation of the SC story and made visible to other participants in the process and to users of the results.

Verification is also likely to be of concern to the most senior levels of any organisation using MSC. The SC stories they select as most significant will be the subject of attention from both staff and funders. CCDB gave responsibility to a staff member from their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) unit to carry out three-monthly field visits to follow up the SC stories selected at the Dhaka headquarters level. ADRA Laos contracted an external evaluator to assess the SC stories and the process that generated them.

What types of MSC stories should be verified?

We do not recommend making random checks of reported changes as a method of verification and we don't know of any organisation that has used random checks.

The best verification method is to check those changes that have been selected as most significant at all levels: at the field level and by middle and senior management. Given the weight of meaning attached to these reported changes, it is wise to ensure that the foundations are secure – that the basic facts are correct.

There are points in the MSC process where verification might be given a high priority. One is when a story is first accepted into the organisation: for example, when a fieldworker documents a change reported to them. Another is when a story is communicated beyond the organisation: for example, to donors or the general public. A further instance is where a story is used as the basis for recommending important changes in an organisation's policies or procedures. This could happen at any level within an organisation using MSC, but is more likely at the senior levels.

What aspects of MSC stories should be verified?

Both the description and interpretation aspects of MSC stories can benefit from verification. With the descriptive part of a story, it is useful to consider whether any information is missing and to ask how accurate the facts are. Is there enough information to enable an independent third party to find out what happened, when and where, and who was involved?

It is likely that most stories will contain some errors of fact. The question is the extent to which these errors affect the significance given to the events by the people involved or the observer reporting the event.

With the interpretive part of a story, it is useful to ask whether the interpretations given to the events are reasonable. It is often impossible to disprove an interpretation, particularly when some information, especially about future consequences, may not be available. As in everyday life, we can look for contradictions within the story, or with other accounts of the same event. It is also worth asking whether what the reporter did after documenting the story is consistent with the contents of the story.

Mozambique – follow-up preferred

"Verification of stories was not done in the pilot study. However, many of the stories had a character that immediately asked for further investigation. The curiosity of MS's program officers was awakened, and it is expected that follow-up will be done. We found that the word 'verification' should not be used in external communications to refer to such further investigations. The word was too much connected with control." ***(Sigsgaard, 2002:11)***

Example

In the late 1990s, the main verification work for CCDB was undertaken by a member of the Impact Assessment Unit at the direction of the most senior selection committee in the Dhaka headquarters. A report based on field visits was written up and circulated to all participating CCDB staff.

Step 8: Quantification

MSC places a strong emphasis on qualitative reporting of change, using stories rather than numbers to communicate what is happening. However, there is also a place for quantification of changes.

Within MSC, there are three ways in which quantitative information can be collected and analysed. The first is within individual stories. It is possible, as with any news story, to indicate how many people were involved, how many activities took place and to quantify effects of different kinds.

The second method can be used after the selection of the most significant of all stories, possibly in association with the feedback stage. For example, if the most significant of all stories referred to a woman buying land in her own name (as in Bangladesh), all participants could then be asked for information about all other instances of this kind of change that they are aware of. This one-off inquiry does not need to be repeated during subsequent reporting periods.

The third means of quantification is possible during Step 9. This method involves examining the full set of collected SC stories, including those not selected at higher levels within the organisation, and counting the number of times a specific type of change is noted.

Step 9: Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring

Both secondary analysis and meta-monitoring refer to an additional level of analysis that complements the participatory selection of SC stories. Step 9 is not a critical step in MSC, but in our experience it can be very useful and it adds further legitimacy and rigour to the process.

Secondary analysis involves the examination, classification and analysis of the **content (or themes) across** a set of SC stories, whereas meta-monitoring will focus more on the **attributes of the stories**, e.g. the origins and fate of the SC stories, including who identified them, who selected them, etc. Meta-monitoring can be done continually or periodically. Because secondary analysis is a more in-depth look at the contents of all the stories it tends to be done less frequently, such as once a year.

Both techniques involve analysing a complete set of SC stories including those that were not selected at higher levels. Unlike the selection process in MSC, Step 9 is generally done in a less participatory way, often by the person in charge of monitoring and evaluation, or a specialist.

Record keeping

In order to do either meta-monitoring or secondary analysis, all documented SC stories need to be kept on file, regardless of how far they progressed up the hierarchy of selection processes. In our experience, the best place to keep the SC stories is probably at the first point within the organisation where they are documented: for example, in the field offices of an organisation, where field staff who interact with beneficiaries are based. Some organisations, such as MS Denmark, have gone a step further and entered their SC stories into a text database. This would be useful for those planning to do secondary analysis at a later stage or wanting to make the SC stories widely accessible within their organisation, but it is not essential.

In preparation for both meta-monitoring and secondary analysis, it is also useful to develop a supporting spreadsheet containing data about each of the SC stories, one per row. Each column entry can provide the following types of 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.

Meta-monitoring

Meta-monitoring is relatively simple, it does not require expert knowledge and we strongly recommend it. There are four main types of measures that can be monitored.

- **The total number of SC stories written in each reporting period and how this changes over time**. A larger number of SC stories might be expected at the start of MSC as participants 'mine' all the SC stories they can remember. A continually diminishing trend over a long period of time might reflect disenchantment with the use of MSC or a mistaken view that only really big changes should be reported (see Chapter 3: Troubleshooting).
- **Who is writing stories and who is not, and how the membership of these groups changes over time.** This analysis can include attention to differences such as men versus women, old versus young participants, those belonging to different ethnic groups or classes, and different locations. This may provide us with insight into the performance of different parts of the project both in terms of participating in MSC and in terms of achieving valued results. For example, low numbers within some regions may reflect a lack of understanding of MSC, or resistance to its use, but it could also reflect real differences in what has been achieved on the ground (the impact of the organisation's activities). Which of these explanations best apply can be usefully discussed in staff workshops.
- **Whose stories are being selected and whose are not.** Again, this analysis can be done in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, class and location, according to local concerns.
- **What has happened to those SC stories.** How many generated recommendations, and how many of these recommendations were then acted on. Again, this analysis can be done in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, class and location, according to local concerns.

Who is going to use this analysis?

There are two likely user groups. One is the staff member(s) charged with responsibility for managing the use of MSC within their organisation. Having someone in this role can be useful. CCDB assigned a person to be in charge of MSC and kept a person in that role throughout the 1990s. Their responsibilities included organising verification visits to field offices to follow up SC stories that had been selected by middle and senior level selection processes.

The other potential user groups are boards of trustees and the organisation's donors who receive the SC stories that come out of the top of the selection processes. These groups need contextual information that tells them where the stories come from. This can be in two forms. One is a short account of how the MSC process works, in abstract. The other is some information about how MSC worked in practice: how many stories were collected, by what percentage of the expected participants, who was involved in the identification and then the selection of SC stories. This is where meta-monitoring data can be very useful. Both the CCDB and Target 10 applications made use of published annual summaries of SC stories that included some meta-monitoring data about numbers of stories and participants.

Secondary analysis

Once you have some experience of implementing MSC, you may want to do some deeper analysis of all the stories together. This is one means of using MSC as a component of summative[2] evaluation. However, we believe that MSC can still be a rigorous and useful process without secondary analysis.

Secondary analysis is easier if you already have some research and analysis skills. Rick and Jess have both experimented with various forms of secondary analysis, and it is fertile territory for research students. Secondary analysis is generally done in a non-participatory way by a researcher or a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) specialist. Some recent innovations are described in Chapter 9.

Analysis of the range of changes described in the SC stories

There are many different ways to analyse and describe the range of changes or themes contained in a set of SC stories. You can find out more about these options in publications that explain how to do qualitative analysis. In the following paragraphs we provide a brief overview of some ways of conducting secondary analysis with a set of SC stories.

Thematic coding

One basic method of thematic coding is to search all the stories for different kinds of change. Note every new type of change on a piece of paper and attach it to the story to remind you what sorts of change it refers to. Once you have examined all the stories and have no more new types of change, remove the notes and sort them into categories that represent similar types of change. You can then go back through all the stories and work out which stories refer to each type of change. This is a bit like domains, but much more specific; you may

2. *Summative evaluation* is generally conducted after completion of the program (or when a program has stabilised) and for the benefit of some external audience or decision-maker. The findings from a summative evaluation could be used to decide whether to continue a program or not, or to justify program spending. Formative evaluation is conducted to provide program staff with judgments useful in improving the program. The aim of a summative evaluation is to report on the program, whereas a formative evaluation reports to the program *(Scriven 1994)*.

have listed 30 or more types of change. You can document your results in a table with the categories of change as column headings and one row for each SC story. Each cell contains a simple yes or no (1 or 0; tick or cross), and these can then be aggregated into totals and percentages.

Analysing the SC stories for positive and negative changes

The incidence of negative versus positive changes is one issue that many users of MSC are likely to make a high priority for analysis. At first view, this could be seen as a meta-monitoring task, because negative SC stories should be simple to identify and count. But this task can be more complex than appears at first glance, and more care needs to be taken. SC stories that appear positive may have negative aspects and vice versa. Individual stories about successful resolution of credit repayment problems, when seen time and time again, also seem to signal negative developments – the growing incidence of such problems. Participants may insert negative comments into their SC stories in quite subtle ways. Identifying negative SC stories can be especially difficult in MSC applications that involve translation of SC stories across languages and cultures.

Analysing the changes mentioned in MSC stories against a logic model

Stories can also be analysed by using a hierarchy of expected outcomes (i.e. a program logic model) and scoring each story against the highest level of the hierarchy that is referred to in the story.

Bennett's hierarchy (Bennett, 1976), which describes a theory of voluntary behaviour change in seven steps, is an example of a generic outcomes hierarchy. The first level is inputs (1), which are the resources expended by the project. The inputs are used in activities (2) that involve people (3) with certain characteristics. Level 4 relates to the way these people react or respond (4) to their experiences, which can lead to changes in their knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations and confidence (5); level 5 is often abbreviated to *KASAC*. If these changes occur, people may then instigate practice change (6) that achieves an end result (7), which is expressed in terms of social, economic or environmental change; level 7 is often abbreviated to *SEEC*. Level 6 represents the short-term impact of a project. Level 7 represents the longer-term results.

The 'logical framework' used in planning development and aid programs is similar to Bennett's hierarchy, only shorter.

We have found that participants in the group selection of SC stories tend to use informal hierarchies on an unplanned basis. For example, stories about impacts on people's lives tend to be rated more highly than stories about program activities that are precursors to those impacts.

If you are interested in this approach, you may need to do some research on program logic and outcomes hierarchies. Jess used this form of analysis for the Target 10 project (Dart 2000).

Analysing the genre

Content analysis can also focus on the genre people use to write MSC stories. A genre is a large-scale categorisation of experience and includes such forms as drama, tragedy, comedy, satire, farce and epic. These forms can tell us something about the overarching beliefs of the organisation using MSC, and the morale of the people who work there. Rick did some analysis of genre in his doctoral thesis, which can be found at: http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/thesis.htm

Mozambique – cultural effects

"In the beginning respondents often told their stories in a very flowery, formal and roundabout way. This was especially marked in Mozambique, and may be due to the Portuguese language inviting such diversions. It may also be due to a tradition of being very 'formal' when you report to officials or other like persons." (*Peter Sigsgaard, 2002:11)*

Analysing differences between selected stories and those not selected

Some very interesting findings can be made by examining the differences between the stories that were selected and those that were not. You can examine differences in many aspects, including:

- the types of changes
- the storytellers
- the long-term or short-term nature of the changes described in the story.

This type of analysis can reveal things such as an unrepresentative proportion of stories selected (or not selected) from a particular region. This may reflect differences in the quality of SC stories coming from different people and locations, especially if this ratio is stable over time. It can also indicate real differences in what has been happening on the ground. As well as reflecting the comparative performance of different parts of the organisation, it may also provide insight into what the organisation values.

Victoria – what secondary analysis revealed

"For example, in the Target 10 case, secondary analysis revealed several differences between stories that were and were not selected. Stories narrated by a beneficiary were more likely to be selected and stories that concerned higher-level outcomes (against the logic model) were more likely to be selected." *(Jess Dart, 2000)*

Similarly, looking at the differences between stories selected by different stakeholder groups can reveal differences in desired outcomes and values.

Bangladesh – preference for long-term changes

"In CCDB, the SC stories that were selected in the final selection process (an Annual Roundtable Meeting with donors) involved changes that had taken place over a long period of time. This seemed to be connected with both CCDB's and the donors' concern to establish evidence of longer-term impact. While this is understandable it can be at the cost of not seeing short-term changes that the organisation can respond to quickly, and thereby change the incidence of." *(Rick Davies, 1998c)*

Analysing the activities or groups mentioned in stories

You can analyse SC stories to find out how often different types of beneficiaries are represented within the full set of stories. If there is good coverage of all types of beneficiaries,

you can be more confident that the findings represent the whole population. In the case of CCDB, the total number of beneficiary groups referred to in stories grew month by month, so that after 10 months, more than 70 per cent of all the village groups had been the subject of at least one story.

Analysing the length of time participants were engaged in the project

Further insight can come from analysing how long the beneficiaries (or communities) experiencing the changes described in the story have participated in the program. In many rural development programs, there is an expectation that longer-term participation is related to increased positive impacts. On the other hand, there is evidence in some savings and credit programs that the most dramatic impact on people's lives takes place shortly after they join the program.

Analysing the selection criteria

As well as analysing the story itself, it is possible to analyse the criteria that different groups use to select SC stories. Questions to ask include, *'Do the criteria vary across time?'* and *'Do different groups of stakeholders use different criteria to judge the stories?'*. Because the MSC process documents the criteria used by groups to select one story over another, it provides insight into what the organisation values at any given time. It can also be interesting to compare the criteria used by different organisations. For example, there is tension in many organisations between concern about having an impact on people's lives and ensuring the sustainability of the services that create impact. Tension can also arise when there are different views of the relative importance of the social and economic impacts of program activities.

Step 10: Revising the system

Almost all organisations that use MSC change the implementation in some way, both during and after the introductory phase. This is a good sign, suggesting that some organisational learning is taking place. Not having any revisions would be more worrying, suggesting that MSC is being used in a ritualistic and unreflective way.

Some of these changes have been noted already in the descriptions of Steps 1 to 9. In order of incidence, the most common changes are:

- changes in the names of the domains of change being used: for example, adding domains that capture negative changes, or 'lessons learned'
- changes in the frequency of reporting: for example, from fortnightly to monthly or from monthly to three monthly in CCDB
- changes in the types of participants: for example, VSO allowing middle management to submit their own SC stories
- changes in the structure of meetings called to select the most significant stories.

Many of the changes made by organisations using MSC arise from day-to-day reflection about practice. In a few cases, organisations have undertaken or commissioned meta-evaluations of the MSC process. A recent example is the meta-evaluation of ADRA Laos's use of MSC by Juliet Willetts from the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of

Technology, Sydney, New South Wales. Juliet's meta-evaluation examined four aspects of the use of MSC, described as follows:

- efficiency: how well MSC was implemented using the resources and time available, and how the benefits of MSC compared with the cost
- efficacy: to what extent the purposes of using MSC were achieved
- effectiveness: to what extent the use of MSC enabled ADRA Laos to facilitate program improvement
- replicability: to what extent differences in context, staffing, programs and donors might limit the ability of other organisations to replicate ADRA Laos's use of MSC.

Meta-evaluations of the use of MSC involve extra costs. These are most justifiable where MSC has been implemented on a pilot basis with the aim of extending its use on a much wider scale if it proves to be successful. This was the case with the ADRA Laos meta-evaluation.

Chapter Three: **Troubleshooting**

The most common of the problems and concerns that people encounter when introducing and using MSC are listed in this chapter. Some of these are also addressed in other sections of this Guide, such as Chapter 6 on validity.

Concerns expressed by participants

Problems with the question

Many people have commented on the difficulty of eliciting good stories. This is often associated with how the question has been translated – and particularly the word 'significance'.

Eliciting good stories requires some research skills – as does community development in general. You must be able to engage with people and elicit their views. If the question isn't working, then you may need to re-phrase it carefully. Once you find a good way of phrasing the question in the local language, stick to it. In Bougainville, Jess found it helpful to go through a stepped questioning process as shown in the example below.

Bougainville – issues with how to phrase the question

"I did not find it easy collecting the stories using the MSC question technique; people did not immediately understand what I was trying to get at. This may be much easier in Tok Pisin, but in English it needed more prompts to get at an in-depth answer. In the end, I used a modified version of MSC where I asked the following four questions.

- **How have you been involved in the project?**
- **What are the important changes that have resulted from this project for you?**
- **What are the important changes that have occurred in the community as a result of this project?**
- **What problems were there?**

The story seemed to emerge from any of these four questions, depending on the experience of the participants." ***(Jess Dart, working for Oxfam New Zealand, 2004)***

Nothing has changed, so what can we report?

This response may suggest that respondents are looking for changes that can be defined as significant in some sort of absolute sense. It helps to ask respondents to look for any changes at all and then to identify those they think are the most significant, in relative terms, of all the changes they have noted. For those more philosophically inclined, it may also be worthwhile quoting Heraclitus, who reportedly said 'It is not possible to step into the same river twice', meaning that change is taking place all the time, so it is never true to say that nothing has changed. The idea is that if no change can be seen, the person concerned should take a closer look.

What do you mean by significant – compared to what?

Yes, if a group is to come to a judgment about what they think is most significant, it must be by reference to some common concern. With many applications of MSC, the common concern will be the objectives of the program, no matter how vaguely they may be defined at that stage.

Ghana – whose perspective?

"When trying to agree on the 'most' significant changes during Period III, two examples were given of changes in one district that would NOT have been significant in another. The introduction of two health insurance schemes in Jaman (eventually selected as the most significant change in rural livelihoods) would NOT have been significant in Asunafo, where such schemes already exist. Similarly, the bank 'susu' scheme that was identified as the most significant change in service delivery in Asunafo would not have been significant in Jaman, where it already operates. This discussion led to the conclusion that we should not be comparing the RELATIVE significance TO THE BENEFICIARIES of the changes, but rather the relative significance from OUR perspective. No amount of discussion could change the perfectly valid statements that the 'susu' scheme or the health insurance schemes were of great significance in each of the districts where they had been introduced. This was not something that could be 'traded', however persuasive the arguments put forward for either. Were we approaching the selection of 'most' significant change with the wrong criteria in mind?". *(Johnston, 2002:9)*

This is totally subjective!

Some participants may not be comfortable with the idea that they have to exercise their own judgment about what is a significant change, rather than make choices according to pre-defined and agreed rules.

We suggest two ways of responding to this concern. One is to explain that by asking people to write down their explanations for their choices of what is most significant, we are making their subjectivity accountable. Their judgments become open to scrutiny by other participants. Knowing that fact may also encourage participants to think carefully about how they explain their choices. On the other hand, this very possibility may be a source of anxiety, especially where people are not normally asked to make judgment calls!

The second response is to say that in making a judgment there is no response that is objectively correct or incorrect. We are asking for people's interpretations. Built into those interpretations are arguments about what values are important in a given situation. One person may argue for the significance of a specific change on the grounds of sustainability, another because of improvements in gender equity. Choices between these interpretations involve choices about priorities given to different values, and this is a matter of negotiation rather than calculation of truth.

Ghana – what is significance?

"Significance IS 'subjective', and the successive 'selections' of the process are not meant to invalidate the previous ones, only to reflect the varying perspectives from which the 'selectors' interpret the stories." ***(Johnston, 2002:9)***

Why do we have to select only one SC story?

For a range of reasons, participants may express concerns or even dislike about having to choose one SC story from among the many SC stories in front of them. If they don't understand the MSC technique, then you can explain that the process of having to make a choice, especially in a group setting, can stimulate debate and encourage people to think more deeply about what is involved in each story. Reluctance to choose can also have a more social and cultural basis. Participants may want to avoid conflict or being seen as critical of others. If this is the case, then consider different ways of structuring the selection process. Some of the options, including voting by secret ballot, are outlined in Step 5. It may be necessary to allow participants to select more than one story. In other difficult settings, participants have been asked to identify SC stories that can be eliminated (i.e. to select the least significant rather than the most significant). We have not experienced any situation where it was impossible to devise some form of selection process.

This is too time-consuming!

Time can be a significant problem in large organisations with large numbers of beneficiaries and staff. Selection processes should be structured so that no meeting called to select SC stories takes more than two hours. Try circulating stories to be read before meetings or having a facilitator at the selection meetings. Established procedures for reading, discussing, scoring or voting then documenting agreed choices can also help. Organisations can change the frequency of reporting SC stories. Only a few do it fortnightly, many do it monthly and some have changed to three-monthly reporting.

The documentation of SC stories by individual participants may be considered time-consuming for a number of reasons. The process may be new and unfamiliar or participants may not be familiar with narrative reporting. In this case, time needs to be taken to build the capacity of people to collect stories. For example, provide positive feedback about good practice, give examples of good practice from elsewhere, and offer refresher training (as has been done by CCDB).

Documentation of stories may be time-consuming because staff have insufficient knowledge of what is happening in the field and have to pay special visits to the communities to elicit stories. This may be symptomatic of wider problems within the organisation and need attention by managers.

Complaints about MSC being time-consuming could also be associated with poor motivation. Participants may not see sufficient benefit from the time they spend on MSC or they may be experiencing other pressures on their time. If participants are not seeing benefits, then find out whether feedback is being sent and received. Have any of the stories nominated by these participants been selected at higher levels? If not, why not? Can helpful advice be given as to reasons why they are not being selected? If there are other pressures on participants' time, these should be identified and addressed by their managers.

This is too competitive!

Selecting the most significant story may go against the non-competitive ethos of some organisations and cultures. Complaints about the competitive nature of the selection process may also reflect individual anxieties about personal performance. While a sense of competition can often be healthy, one way of responding to these concerns is to switch the focus so that any apparent competition is between stories rather than individuals, or between the values behind the choice of stories being made rather than between the stories themselves.

Selection processes can also be designed to control competitive tensions. For example, in one Australian implementation, some participants felt that the selection process was building competition between staff. Some staff disliked the pressure that this generated. The selection process was changed so that staff no longer voted for stories and the selection was done by a stakeholder steering group. This seemed to solve the problem.

None of the SC stories really represent what we are doing!

This may reflect awareness of a worrying gap between expectations and reality, or between head office and field office views of reality. It may also reflect field staff reporting what they think is expected instead of something more realistic. One pre-emptive way to respond is during initial training in MSC. Give a clear message that factual accounts of significant changes of any kind, both expected and unexpected, are required, and that repeated instances of the same kind of significant change are unlikely to be selected as most significant each consecutive reporting period. Another way to respond is through informative feedback attached to the stories selected as most significant. This can point out the positive features of the story and also suggest what is still missing. If the frustration is being expressed by field staff, rather than middle or senior managers, get people to spell out what it is that they think is missing and give an example, which can then be converted into a story.

There is not enough detail in the story to make a judgment!

Taken at face value, this suggests that the story in question should not be selected as most significant of all. Or that it should be sent back to the provider for more details to be included. The same complaint may also mask anxieties about making choices, which is an issue dealt with earlier in this section.

Why hasn't our SC story been selected as most significant of all?

In many cases it takes too long to provide feedback on the merits of all stories that were subject to selection. In these situations, participants have to guess how their stories were

judged, on the basis of the feedback provided to them with the SC story selected as most significant. Some participants may be better at doing this than others. The quality of the feedback provided on the most significant story may not be as good as it could be. One way to address the problems associated with using single case feedback is to ensure that comments about this story are expressed in comparative terms, even referring to other stories if necessary. Another response is to listen to signs of dissatisfaction and respond to them case by case where this seems worthwhile.

Complaints about the results of selection processes may relate to perceived biases in the process. For example, participants may feel that stories are being selected on the grounds of who provided the story, rather than on a story's contents. This is a real risk, especially in larger organisations. Respond by making the selection process as transparent as possible: for example, by showing each participant's ratings for each story that was examined. This risk can also be addressed through secondary analysis. With CCDB, Rick extensively analysed whether individual Dhaka headquarter participants' choices related to the source of stories (by location and staff member). No correlation was found, suggesting no personal biases towards specific sources.

This sentiment can also be aroused when a region identifies a story that represents a change they believe is particularly relevant in their region but this story is not selected at the next level of the organisation. This occurred in one case in Australia, and led to discussions concerning the relationship between regional and statewide priorities.

What about the negative changes? These are being ignored!

This is a valid statement in many applications of MSC. In Chapter 2, Step 2, we outline some different ways of responding to this concern by the use of domains.

Concerns expressed by others

Nicaragua – big changes over a period of time

"The participants in the exercises were able to identify vague or general changes over periods of time, but were not immediately able to pinpoint the moment of change except in the case that it was a big formal event (Grupo Consultivo, October 2003, Nicaragua). I have found that when a general situation or change is offered, it helps to ask the person about the first time they realized there had been a change, where were they, what were they doing, what was the date?" ***(Gillian Holmes, Ibis, 2004)***

Participants' explanations of their choices of stories are being ignored

In our experience in the SC selection processes, many participants focus on the **description** of the SC story, and only make passing reference to (or in some instances ignore) the **explanation** given by the writer for why they selected that particular SC story. The same often goes for the other selection explanations that are later attached to the same story, as it progresses through a number of levels of selection.

This is worrying for two reasons. Firstly, it is neglecting a specific opportunity for second-order learning (Bateson, 1979): not the opportunity to learn how to better achieve a goal, but the opportunity to question and adjust the goals that are being pursued. This questioning often does take place by participants in the selection process, during the lively

discussions about candidate SC stories and the reasons for selecting them, but it is often not well documented. Ignoring the attached explanations is the equivalent of leaving the SC storywriters out of the debate and almost assuming that they had no significant opinion.

The second reason for concern is that the focus on the description of the SC change suggests a focus on finding out **what happened**, as distinct from finding out **who knew** what happened, and **what they thought** about what happened. In organisations that have decentralised decision-making power, local actors have more autonomy and as a result their knowledge and attitude towards what happened is of major importance. It can affect the sustainability and replicability of the successes, and their culpability for the failures.

We therefore argue that these explanations should in fact be given **special attention**. If an important change is identified but misinterpreted by field staff, this could have major consequences for the organisation. Implementing a large-scale program requires a substantial degree of decentralisation and delegation of authority, and it is important to monitor the quality of the judgments made by those with delegated power. Similar concerns apply with programs implemented through sub-contracted partnerships with other organisations. It is the participants' **explanations** that tell us how well their views are aligned with ours. If views are not well aligned, a partnership may fall short of its joint goals – or fail altogether.

There is no easy solution to this problem. The people who introduce MSC to an organisation should take the earliest possible opportunity to highlight the potential for problems of this nature to arise – and watch out for it during implementation. Leadership by example is also important, particularly involving the most senior of the staff who are participating in MSC.

Feedback is being forgotten

In many monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, feedback of analysis and recommendations is an afterthought or may even be neglected altogether. This situation reflects the power differences between the people who are supplying and using M&E

data. Field staff who supply data may not be able to demand information about how their superiors interpret and respond to that data. This is an aspect of MSC use that needs to be watched closely.

In Chapter 2, Step 6, we outline the characteristics of good quality feedback: clear explanations of choices made and a transparent selection process.

The optional meta-monitoring stage (see Chapter 2, Step 9) could include investigating the frequency with which participants reported receiving feedback, and what they thought of the quality of that feedback.

Some possibilities for further research on possible innovations in feedback mechanisms are described in Chapter 9.

What about gender issues?

Since Rick first wrote about CCDB's use of MSC, questions have been raised about how MSC treats gender issues. There was nothing in the design of the MSC process for CCDB that suggested any special attention to or concern with gender issues. For example, none of the domains referred to changes in gender equity. Despite this, the most actively debated aspect of the stories brought to the Annual Roundtable Meeting with CCDB's donors in late 1994 was the nature of the relationship between a man and his wife in a story about a successful small enterprise development. Who contributed the most and who benefited the most? Peter Sigsgaard cites (below) a similar development with MS Denmark's use of MSC in Tanzania.

Mozambique

"... the Review Team was clearly looking for measures to satisfy their indicator (money), mirroring the objective of income generation. The team came to appreciate (through the SC story given to them) that this objective was not so important to the production group, but that gender equity was in focus and had been facilitated by the development intervention." ***(Peter Sigsgaard, 2002:9)***

These examples show how gender issues can be mainstreamed, within overall monitoring of program developments, through the use of MSC – rather than being subjected to special attention via domains or indicators. However, it cannot be assumed that gender issues will **automatically** be documented, or recognised when documented, when MSC is being used. This will depend on the participants' values and the feedback from the selection processes.

A more interventionist option that has been tried is to use separate men and women's groups during the SC story selection process, so that the choices of men and women are clearly visible, and their value differences (and areas of agreement) are also clear. It is also possible to have domains of change that ask specifically about gender issues within assisted communities or elsewhere.

We believe there is a place for specifically directing attention to gender issues at the level of meta-monitoring and content analysis. It is at this stage that attention needs to be given to the gender mix of participants and how their respective stories are treated in the selection process. Content analysis of the stories can include coding of the different types of gender

issues that arise and how selection processes treated these issues. Were they ignored or attended to? Were recommendations made, and if so, were the recommendations appropriate? This analysis should be fed back to the participants to inform their subsequent contributions.

Badly written stories

It is not uncommon for participants in selection processes to express concerns about differences in the quality of the SC stories being examined and compared. Some are better written than others, some are more engaging than others. If there are noticeable differences like this, it is important that they are openly recognised; then the group can decide how to deal with these differences. In our experience the quality of the story is rarely the main reason for rejecting or selecting an SC – unless the SC is so totally lacking in detail that there is nothing to go on. Instead, what participants tend to do is to weight their judgment of the quality of the story by the apparent importance of the content of the story. A poorly written story about important developments can get selected. But a woefully written story will not.

One option is to ask the person who documented the story to re-write it to better convey the changes that are of central concern. This has been done where there is evidence of something important happening, but not enough detail. However, care needs to be taken here. A re-write could easily lead to confusion as to whose story it really is.

Chapter Four: **Building Capability for Effective MSC**

This chapter looks at the resources an organisation may need to implement MSC.

We consider the following strategies:

- building the capacity of the champions
- building the capacity of the staff
- consideration of costs and time.

Building the capacity of the MSC 'champions'

In Chapter 2, Step 1 (How to get started and raise interest), we discussed the benefits of having people to actively champion or promote MSC within an organisation. These champions can:

- excite and motivate people at the beginning
- answer questions about the technique
- facilitate selection of SC stories
- encourage people to collect stories
- ensure that feedback occurs
- ensure that the stories are collected and organised and sent to review meetings
- develop protocols to ensure confidentiality of informants where necessary
- conduct secondary analysis.

While it helps if the champions already have some knowledge of qualitative methods and participatory techniques, our experience suggests that the most important attributes for champions are enthusiasm and interest in MSC. Good facilitation skills are also useful.

Champions need to develop a sound understanding of MSC so they can address the inevitable questions. This knowledge can be acquired in various ways. An inexpensive approach is to read some of the existing documents on MSC (such as this Guide) and to experiment with MSC on a small scale. Many of the organisations that now use MSC began this way. This learning can be accelerated with some basic training in MSC. Rick and Jess are currently planning a 'train the trainers' course for MSC (see MSC website http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MostSignificantChanges/ for dates and locations).

Another option is to have a consultant visit the program office and work with the champions to introduce MSC to the organisation, as well as helping the champions to build their

knowledge base. Other options include staff going on secondments to other organisations that are more experienced in using MSC.

If one person assumes leadership for MSC in an organisation, we strongly recommend building the MSC capacity of a second or third person as well. We know of several instances where implementation of MSC has fallen through when a champion has moved to another job.

Building the capacity of the staff to participate fully in MSC

Getting project staff to understand MSC is a frequent stumbling block. While MSC is relatively simple in practice, for many people it is a radically different way to monitor and evaluate. It is often implemented in cross-cultural and bilingual contexts, where communication of the simplest things can be a challenge. To overcome this hurdle, give some thought to how MSC may best be communicated in your program context, and how participants can acquire enough knowledge and skills to be able to participate. Chapter 2, Step 1 listed some metaphors that can help to describe the role of MSC.

There are probably two main options available for building the capability of program teams in MSC: one is through training, and the other is through mentoring and practice. In most cases, one person has taken an active role in disseminating the technique across the organisation. This may or may not involve that person training the program staff.

How to train people in MSC

In our experience, training generally consists of one to three days of in-house training led by an external consultant or an internal monitoring and evaluation (M&E) specialist. Although there are no foolproof recipes for how to train people in MSC, we can offer you some tips.

1. Use plenty of hands-on exercises. Jess often invites groups, early in the training session, to take part in a role-playing exercise where they read through some stories from a different program context and select those that they think are most significant. Many people find it easier to understand the process when they see it used in a different context – otherwise people tend to focus more on the content of the stories. Having a go at selecting stories for themselves helps people to get a feel for MSC.

2. Ask participants to document their own stories in the training session. An effective training technique is to put participants in pairs and encourage them to interview each other to elicit their MSC stories. Choose a topic that everyone will relate to, such as 'the most significant change in beneficiaries' lives'.

3. Compare MSC with other techniques such as case studies and conventional monitoring systems to help participants understand the differences.

4. Explain how MSC fits into the project or organisation monitoring and evaluation framework; it is not a stand-alone technique and is unlikely to satisfy all the accountability requirements of funders.

5. Offer plenty of opportunity for questions and discussion. People often need time to absorb MSC.

6. If possible, run the training in conjunction with a facilitator who can focus on how the participants are feeling.

7. Once the initial training has been conducted, it helps to have a refresher session after the first stories have been collected and selected. This might be just a few hours long.

Laos – training is essential

"Developing interviewing skills of field staff was not part of the goals of using MSC, but is a prerequisite for sound process and this aspect is one that requires further attention." ***(Juliet Willetts, external evaluation of MSC use by ADRA, 2002)***

Practice and improvement

If training is not an option, it may be possible to implement MSC by trial and error. For example, asking staff to document stories and providing them with feedback about how they went, along with examples (the selected stories), will give them a good idea of how to proceed. MSC has an in-built improvement cycle, so it can work without training. However, initial training can avoid much of the confusion and frustration that program staff sometimes feel when they are thrown into MSC without being fully orientated.

If you choose the path of practice and improvement rather than training, it helps to have someone with a very good understanding of MSC who can answer questions, address any confusion and design systems to minimise frustration.

Victoria, Australia – stories improved gradually over time

"Staff were given no training in MSC. We ran a number of short presentations to staff so that they understood what MSC was, and ran a pilot – but no-one was trained. The first stories were not so good: many were more like testimonials. But over time, the feedback helped staff have a clearer idea about what it was all about and the stories gradually improved, until they were all change focused." ***(Jess Dart, 2000)***

Considering resources and time required

There is no doubt that MSC is time-consuming. As well as the time required to collect the stories, regular meetings must be held to select the most significant stories. This is the most frequently voiced concern at the start of MSC implementation. Once MSC is going smoothly, it should become quicker and more streamlined. Organisations often choose to lengthen the reporting period after a year or so, which also reduces the amount of time the process consumes.

In 2004, ADRA Laos became the first organisation to analyse the amount of time taken to conduct MSC. The following text box and two tables present a picture of a time-intensive venture. However, our experience is that MSC is not always so time-intensive. The time taken depends on the nature of the program and the intended uses of the MSC process.

Laos – estimation of the time spent on MSC

"The time costs of MSC were primarily in the investment in training for staff and secondly in monthly meetings and translation. The actual collection of stories themselves is not particularly time-intensive. The table below demonstrates the time-resources consumed during the pilot project period. It documents the total person-days and person hours for office staff in Vientiane and project staff in the field. In addition to the time documented below, most ADRA Australia staff attended a one hour selection meeting and spent time reading the set of stories." *(Julia Willets, 2004)*

Table 1. Time-costs for MSC activities in pilot project expressed as total person-hours or person-days (modified from original format)

Aspect of MSC	ADRA Vientiane Office Staff	Luangnamtha Field Staff	Attapeu Field Staff
Managing the process (days over 9 month pilot)	60 days	6 days	6 days
Training [include eval w'shop] (days over 9 month pilot)	46 days	45 days	31 days
Travel for training (days over 9 month pilot)	8 days	9 days	9 days
TOTAL DAYS	114 days	60 days	46 days
Monthly activities (conducted for six months)			
Collecting stories (hours/month)	0 hrs	24 hrs	12 hrs
Translation and typing stories (hours/month)	3 hrs	10.5 hrs	12 hrs
Selecting stories (hours/month)	22 hrs	42 hrs	28 hrs
TOTAL Monthly activities (DAYS over six months)	19 days	57 days	40 days
TOTAL DAYS SPENT OVER ENTIRE PILOT PROJECT	133 days	117 days	86 days

Chapter Five: **MSC Within a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Framework**

MSC within the program cycle

Within most organisations there are cyclic processes of planning, implementation, review and revision. This is often referred to as the program or planning cycle. Within this cycle a further distinction is sometimes made between monitoring and evaluation. Distinctions can also be drawn between different forms of monitoring and different forms of evaluation. MSC can be used for monitoring and for evaluation, and for different forms of monitoring. All of these options are reviewed in this chapter.

MSC as monitoring and evaluation

MSC has been conceptualised as a monitoring tool and an evaluation tool. The distinctions between monitoring and evaluation are blurred, and both terms can be defined in various ways. In this Guide, we refer to monitoring as an ongoing process of information collection primarily for the purpose of program management. As such, monitoring tends to focus on activities and outputs. We refer to evaluation as a less-frequent process of information collection that tends to focus more on outcomes and impacts. Both processes involve judgments about achievements, but evaluation tends to take a wider view of an entire program and encompass a longer period of time, often from the inception of the program to the present.

In our view, MSC sits on the line that differentiates monitoring and evaluation, which could help to explain why it is so difficult to describe. Like monitoring, MSC provides ongoing data about program performance that assists program management. But MSC goes further than most conventional forms of monitoring in that it also focuses on outcomes and impact, involving people in making judgments about the relative merits of different outcomes in the form of MSC stories. In this way, MSC contributes to both monitoring and evaluation.

MSC as a specific type of monitoring

When Rick first documented MSC, he looked at the types of outcomes that could be monitored, and noted how different forms of monitoring were needed to track these different types of outcomes. These factors are summarised in the table below.

Table 2: Types of outcomes

Outcomes are	Expected	Unexpected
Of agreed significance	Predefined indicators are most useful	MSC is useful
Of disagreed significance	Indicators are useful and MSC is useful	MSC is most useful

Note that we do not consider MSC to be a substitute for more conventional monitoring of activities and outputs against predetermined indicators such as the number of meetings held or the number of participants within a program. Instead, MSC provides a complementary form of monitoring and one that fills an important gap. We do not believe that MSC should be used as the only technique in a monitoring and evaluation framework. However, where there is no existing framework, MSC is an excellent place to start as it builds staff capacity to capture outcomes.

The next section summarises the ways in which MSC is a complementary form of monitoring and the gaps that it fills.

MSC tells us about unexpected outcomes

Conventional quantitative monitoring of predetermined indicators only tells us about what we think we need to know. It does not lead us to into the realm of what we don't realise we need to know. The difference here is between deductive and inductive approaches. Indicators are often derived from some prior conception, or 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 monitor the 'messy' impacts of our work – including the 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 so that they achieve more of the outcomes they value.

Ghana – changes outside the logical framework

"The recognition that changes take place distinct from those anticipated as indicators in the project logframe seems important. In the particular example of BADSP, it is highly unlikely that many of the indicators will be met, and yet the project has seen considerable change occurring in the districts in which it operates…" ***(Johnston, 2002:11)***

MSC encourages and makes constructive use of a diversity of views

In many monitoring systems, the events of concern are defined by people distant from where the events happen and are monitored. Indicators are often identified by senior executive staff or senior staff specialist research units. Some organisations have tried to improve the situation by taking the indicator identification process down the hierarchy. In some cases this has meant using Participatory Rural Appraisal methods to obtain the views of the beneficiaries themselves. The problem with such an approach is the difficulty the organisation then finds in summarising the information produced by a diversity of locally identified indicators.

MSC gives those closest to the events being monitored (e.g. the field staff and beneficiaries) the right to identify a variety of stories that they think are relevant. 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.

MSC enables rather than directs participants

With monitoring 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.

MSC enables broad participation

The events documented by an organisation's monitoring 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.

Ghana – MSC shows a richer picture

"… the wealth of material collected would never have been gathered without the explicit attempt to monitor significant change. In itself, it provides a picture of the context in which BADSP operates that is quite different from any that might be developed from traditional project documentation." ***(Johnston, 2002:11)***

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 systems, indicators remain essentially the same each reporting period: the same questions are asked again and again, and the focus remains the same. There is limited scope for independent (constructive or subversive) staff adaptations of the monitoring system. With MSC, the contents of the monitoring system are potentially far more dynamic and adaptive, although in practice this will of course vary from organisation to organisation. Participants choose what to report within specified domains and, less frequently, can change the domains themselves. MSC stories can reflect real changes in the world as well as changing views within an organisation about what is important.

MSC as program evaluation

Patton (1997) suggests that program evaluation findings can serve three primary purposes: 'rendering judgments, facilitating improvements and/or generating knowledge'. MSC can be used for all three purposes.

Rendering judgments

As far as we know, MSC has not been used as the sole technique for producing summative judgments of the overall success of a program. We would have serious reservations about attempting to use MSC in this way. Most evaluations benefit by using a mix of methods (e.g. participative and expert, deductive and inductive).

MSC can be used as an activity built into a summative evaluation or as an activity preceding a summative evaluation. In both cases, MSC can provide a wealth of mini-case study material to support and illustrate arguments that are developed during the evaluation. Records of the selection processes can also provide a wealth of success criteria that should inform the criteria being used by evaluators and any other participants in the evaluation process (Dart and Davies, 2003).

MSC can also play a more central part in the evaluation process as a means of identifying and aggregating the views of different stakeholders on a large scale. Rick used MSC for this purpose in a series of evaluations of DFID-funded NGO programs in Africa and Asia. Compared to using MSC for monitoring, this involved a longer reference period (i.e. changes in the last three years) and paid greater attention to obtaining MSC stories from identifiably different stakeholder groups.

MSC can also be combined with a theory-led (deductive) approach to evaluation. Most programs have an expectation (i.e. a theory) about when the most significant impacts of program activities will be most evident. In many programs, more impact is expected to occur towards the end rather than the beginning of the program. However, in others such as savings and credit programs, the maximum impact can occur at a different time. For example, this could be within three months of members joining a savings and credit group for the first time. These predictions can be tested by collecting data on pre-defined indicators and examining trends in the SC stories collected over the lifetime of a program. CCDB participants were asked to examine the stories selected over the past 10 months

and identify the most significant of all. This process could be extended to cover a longer period of time and strengthened by asking participants to rank the stories rather than simply selecting the most significant.

Programs also vary in the extent to which they are expected to equitably affect a large number of beneficiaries or affect only a small number of beneficiaries. Most programs that aim to improve service delivery expect some degree of comprehensive and equitable coverage of beneficiaries. In contrast, programs involving research into new technologies, such as improved rice productivity, will expect a significant number of failures – and hope for some outstanding successes. One outstandingly successful research result will have the potential to affect large numbers of beneficiaries when applied by farmers nationwide. MSC, with its focus on the 'edge of experience', may be better suited to evaluating programs that focus on research rather than service delivery.

Generating knowledge

Patton's third purpose relates to knowledge generation via evaluation, especially knowledge that can be exported beyond the program of concern to others that might be able to use this knowledge. This is a typical aim of theory-led evaluation, of the kind Pawson and Tilley propose in their 1997 book *Realistic Evaluation*. On the surface, MSC does not seem well suited to this purpose, and we have not seen it used in this way. However, if we see MSC stories as mini-case studies, it is quite conceivable that the stories could be a rich source of hypotheses about how things work in programs. MSC could be used, in part, to identify causal relationships between particular activities and outcomes in stories and to then recommend systematic surveys of the incidence of these activities and their relationship to the outcomes. This usage is an extension of Step 8: Quantification (See Chapter 2).

Facilitating improvements

MSC was originally designed for, and seems most obviously suited to, Patton's second evaluation purpose: to facilitate improvements. MSC can enable organisations to focus their work towards explicitly valued directions and away from less valued directions. Even within the many positive SC stories, there are choices to be made about which ones to respond to and which to leave aside for the time being. These choices are available through the diversity of stories identified by participants.

Several factors affect the extent to which the use of MSC leads to actual program improvement. SC stories are sometimes selected as most significant of all because they confirm existing views of what the organisation should be doing. These may not lead to any observable improvement, except perhaps in the form of greater organisational coherence and clarity in an organisation's views about where it is going. This type of outcome might indicate a poorly functioning MSC: the process has failed to identify a significant change, a difference that makes a difference. This is more likely when stories are very brief or explanations are poorly documented. In contrast, some stories do identify or imply follow-up actions that need to be taken in order to make a change. Some MSC users have tried to capture these by including a recommendations section at the end of the reporting form (e.g. BADSP in Ghana).

The types of changes that participants focus on may also be important. During implementation of MSC, choices are made, though the selection process, about what duration of change is of most interest. Senior staff can reinforce an organisation's focus on long-term change by selecting appropriate stories or they can select shorter-term changes.

It seems likely that the longer-term changes will be more difficult to quickly influence through responses to recommendations, simply because they are long term. Conversely, short-term changes should be easier to influence. This is a view that could be tested through further evaluations of the use of MSC.

Frequency of reporting is another factor that affects the ability of the MSC process to influence program improvement. In theory, the more frequently changes are tracked, the more opportunities there are to identify whether follow-up actions are having any effect – and to identify and respond to newly emerging issues. Equally importantly, collecting stories more frequently enables participants to more quickly learn how to make the best use of MSC. VSO has faced the biggest challenge in this area. Not only does VSO collect and select stories on an annual basis, the main source of its stories is VSO volunteers working in developing countries for an average term of two years.

Another adjustable setting that may affect how program improvement takes place is the choice of domains. Domains can be defined in advance, applied at all levels and focused on existing organisational objectives. They can also be defined more loosely, only applied after significant changes are identified and include 'any other change' domains. ADRA in Laos may be moving from domains focused on objectives to wider categories relating to positive and negative changes. The consequences of such a change would be worth tracking.

MSC can also affect program performance by influencing the definition, and even the choice, of a program's objectives – as distinct from the achievement of these objectives. While many program evaluations may benefit from examining unexpected outcomes, MSC plays a pivotal role in evaluating programs with less predictable outcomes. For example, some extension programs have deliberately loose outcomes and participatory design, often yielding a multitude of complex and diverse outcomes. These types of programs are ideally suited to evaluation techniques that involve searching for and deliberating the value of significant outcomes. In such programs, the refinement of MSC domains over time, as quasi-objective statements, could be seen as a product of the process, not just as part of the MSC technique.

MSC and organisational learning

MSC can have a formative influence on organisations beyond the realm of program-specific activities and performance. Perhaps most importantly, MSC has the potential to influence what can be called the 'population of values' held by staff within an organisation, and maybe even within its associated stakeholders. In the selection process, designated people such as funders, program staff and stakeholder committee members deliberate about how to judge MSC stories. This involves considerable dialogue about what criteria should be used to select winning stories. Questions like: 'Is this change sustainable?', 'Did women benefit from this event?', 'Will donors like this outcome?' all embody views about priority values. The choice of one story over another reinforces the importance of a particular combination of values. At the very least, the process of discussion involved in story selection helps participants become aware of and understand each other's values. Analysing the content of selected stories, as discussed in Chapter 2, Step 9, can help identify the extent to which organisational learning is taking place in terms of changes in the prevalence of particular values.

The process of dialogue has horizontal and vertical dimensions. The horizontal dimension is between a group of participants engaged in discussing and selecting the most significant of a set of stories. Vertical dialogue involves exchanges of views between groups of participants at different levels, e.g. field staff, middle managers, senior managers and donors. The vertical dimension is very important if the MSC process is to aid organisational learning throughout the organisation, but it is also the slower of the two processes and the most vulnerable to failure. It depends on good documentation and communication of the results of one group's discussion to the next. The downward link is most at risk, because those at the lower levels of an organisation rarely have authority over those above.

Other uses of MSC within programs

In addition to its monitoring and evaluation functions, MSC can also assist in:

- fostering a more shared vision
- helping stakeholder steering committees to steer
- building staff capacity in evaluation
- providing material for publicity and communications
- providing material for training staff
- celebrating success.

Fostering a more shared vision

Regularly discussing what is being achieved and how this is valued can contribute to a more shared vision between those involved in MSC (e.g. the people who collect, select and receive feedback about the stories). In this way, MSC helps groups of people to make sense of the myriad effects that their interventions cause, and to define what it is that they want to achieve. Unlike a vision statement, the shared vision that accompanies MSC is dynamic and can respond to changing contexts and times.

Helping stakeholder steering committees to steer

Especially in developed economies, many social change programs have stakeholder steering committees. However, the task of steering a program without delving too deeply into management issues can be challenging. MSC enables a stakeholder committee to act as a sounding board to a program team, advising what committee members think valuable and not so valuable in terms of the outcomes represented in SC stories.

Building staff capacity in evaluation

MSC can help to build the capacity of program staff to identify and make sense of program impacts. Busy organisations tend to focus on what needs to be done next, rather than searching for the impacts of what has already been done. Many organisations struggle to demonstrate the impact of their work. MSC is an excellent way to encourage a group of people to focus on the impact of their work. The feedback loops within MSC can ensure that people continuously learn and improve their skills in articulating instances of significant impact.

Providing material for publicity and communications

After several rounds of filtering, the stories that emerge from the selection process are generally very strong, powerful accounts of program impact. These stories make excellent material for publicity and communications activities. An added bonus is that these stories have been bought into by a whole group of people.

While this is a very attractive way to use the stories, care must be taken that publicity does not drive the MSC process, which at its worst could become a propaganda machine. If an organisation just wants success stories for publicity purposes, it would be far more efficient to hire a reporter to go out and collect these.

It is also worth considering the ethics of using stories for publicity or communication purposes. If a story is to be published outside an organisation, the storyteller and the people mentioned in the story must consent to this use.

Providing material for training staff

The stories themselves can also be used to show new staff how the program works, and what things yield desired results. In some schools of business management, case studies are used as the primary teaching tool, as the focus of problem-solving tasks. Students can be asked about how they would respond if they were working in the situation described in the case study. Many SC stories could be converted into simple case studies, especially if they were followed up by verification visits, which would generate more story detail.

Celebrating success

Sharing success stories can form part of a celebration process. In some programs, large groups of beneficiaries have come together and shared SC stories and celebrated what has been achieved. A good story can be incredibly moving and form a human and enjoyable way of acknowledging achievements.

Chapter Six: **Validity and Voice in MSC**

People engaged in implementing MSC sometimes express concerns about validity. Like many qualitative approaches, MSC does not rest on conventional measures of validity such as statistical tests to determine the significance of differences. This chapter explains why we believe MSC can be considered a valid way of drawing conclusions about such work. We then tackle two of the more controversial aspects of MSC: the sampling technique and the issue of bias.

MSC: a valid technique

The mechanisms employed by MSC to ensure validity include:

- thick description
- systematic process of selection
- transparency
- verification
- participation
- member checking.

Thick description

In qualitative approaches, validity is ensured by presenting solid descriptive data or **thick description** (Geertz, 1973) so that there is enough internally coherent information in order that others can attach their own interpretations. Thick description consists of closely textured accounts of events, placed in their local context; the observer's role and subjectivity are visible. In the world of ordinary people, these accounts often take the form of stories or anecdotes. SC stories are accompanied by the reviewers' reasons for selection as well as the storyteller's reasons for telling the story. This is an even thicker level of description (a meta-level, perhaps?), which gives readers an opportunity to attach their own interpretations to a story – and to interpret the reasons why others have selected the story.

Systematic process of selection

Validity is enhanced in MSC through a systematic process of selection. All stories are analysed by a panel of designated stakeholders, who attach their interpretations to the story. The selected stories may be passed on to another group for selection, which must also attach its interpretations to the stories. This process is far more systematic and disciplined (and inclusive) than the way most information would be captured from an organisation.

Transparency

This is a cornerstone for rigorous qualitative analysis. Regardless of how analysis is done, analysts who use qualitative approaches have an obligation to monitor and report their own analytical procedures and processes as fully and truthfully as possible. The MSC process

emphasises transparency by systematically recording the interpretations and making them transparent for all to see.

This point can be highlighted by comparing MSC with a case study approach. In a typical case study approach, an expert researcher will decide which information is presented in the case study and which is not. They will describe the methods used to capture the data and the process of interpreting the data, but the success criteria that underpin their interpretations are generally not transparent. With many case studies, it is difficult to tell if they were purposively selected (and if so, on what basis) or randomly selected. Without this information, it is difficult for a reader to know what value to put on the events in the case study.

Verification

This is a key step to ensure the validity of SC stories (see Chapter 2, Step 7) and can occur at several levels. Firstly, many stories are collected by fieldworkers who regularly observe what is happening in the field; they may choose to investigate more fully if they are suspicious that a story is untrue or inaccurate. Secondly, most stories are accompanied by the names of those involved in the event and the location of the event – therefore making their origin transparent. Thirdly, during the selection process, all stories are vetted by panels of designated people who will often have in-depth knowledge about the project and will cross-check the accuracy of the stories while considering them; stories that seem implausible or factually incorrect will not be selected. Finally, a selection of stories (usually the 'winning' stories selected at the highest level of an organisation) can be externally verified to determine whether they are accurate, in addition to following up the events that have transpired since the story was first told.

Participation

MSC is particularly valid in the context of participatory programs. It promotes the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders, and employs methods that encourage equal expression of views and sharing of lessons.

One of the major challenges facing the field of international development in the last 15 years has been how to measure the impact of participatory projects in a manner that is in keeping with the philosophy of these projects (Oakley et al, 1998). The overriding concern is for the process of monitoring and evaluation to reinforce, rather than inhibit, participation and empowerment of the program participants. External evaluation based on outside values about what constitutes success is not appropriate in this context. In many cases, participatory projects require participatory monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches that allow stakeholders and beneficiaries to state their views about which changes are important and which should be measured.

Member checking

This provides an additional way of adding to the validity and accuracy of the SC stories. This involves cross-checking the documented version of the SC with the original storyteller and the people named in the story. When one person collects a story by 'interviewing' another, we encourage the person documenting the story to share their notes and to allow the storyteller to edit and re-word the story until satisfied that it reflects what they were attempting to convey. This can simply be a matter of reading back the story after it has been documented.

Purposive sampling

The MSC sampling technique is selective rather than inclusive. Instead of providing information on the 'average condition' of participants, it provides information about exceptional circumstances, particularly successful circumstances. This is referred to as **purposive sampling**. Some would argue that the information that this sample technique produces is not a reliable basis on which to make judgments about the performance of a program.

Nevertheless, purposive sampling (or purposeful sampling) is a legitimate form of data inquiry in qualitative research and forms a dominant part of the logic of qualitative research. Patton states that: "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term **purposeful sampling**."(Patton, 1990:169)

Patton describes several different strategies of purposive sampling that serve particular evaluation purposes. The 'extreme or deviant case sampling' approach focuses on cases that are rich in information because they are unusual or special in some way. The MSC sampling system uses this approach in capturing significant instances of success or failure. The purpose is to learn from these extreme stories, and ultimately to move extension practices more towards success and away from failure. Therefore the strategy is to select those stories from which the most can be learned.

If the purpose of monitoring and evaluation is to precisely document the natural variation among outcomes for beneficiaries, and you want to be able to make generalisations about the experience of all participants, then you need a random sample that is large enough to be representative. However, Patton (1990:170) suggests that, "… in many instances more can be learned from intensively studying extreme or unusual cases than can be learned from statistical depictions of what the average case is like". Another popular option is to combine approaches so that you gain an understanding of the normal distribution of participants as well as the extreme cases. In CCBD and Target 10, MSC was combined with other approaches that captured the normal distribution of farmers attending programs.

There is some evidence that extended use of MSC can lead to reporting from a much wider range of participants than a randomly sampled survey. In CCDB, the number of *shomities* (participants groups) that were the subject of SC stories grew progressively month by month as staff continued to search for SC stories to report. After one year, more than 70 per cent of the shomities in the MSC pilot area had been the subject of a story. By contrast, a typical random sample survey would probably not aim to reach more than 10 per cent at the most. This suggests that in any MSC application it is worth tracking the extent to which SC stories are being sampled from an increasing range of sources, versus remaining concentrated on a small subset. The former trend would be more supportive of claims of widespread impact. However, as noted above, in some programs such as agricultural research, a dramatic finding in one of many funded research activities can be more significant, in the longer term, than many smaller scale achievements across a range of funded research activities.

Bias in MSC

Bias towards success

MSC often tends to favour success stories rather than 'bad news'. In Target 10, about 90 per cent of stories concerned positive outcomes. The proportion in ADRA Laos ranged from 80 to 90 per cent. However, this is not necessarily a failing, because identifying what the program can achieve when it is at its best should help move the program towards achieving more of these positive outcomes. Designation of a specific domain to capture negative stories (Chapter 2, Step 2) can be done if this is desired.

Subjectivity in the selection process

The MSC selection process is subjective in that it is an expression of the values of the people on the selection panels. It is therefore important to be aware who is and who is not represented on the selection panels. However, unlike other research approaches, this subjectivity is another source of data about organisational values. The reasons for selecting SC stories are recorded and documented along with the stories themselves. The inclusion of these interpretations as another form of evaluative data affords a high level of transparency.

Bias towards popular views

Another criticism of the MSC selection process (and all methods that strive for consensus) is that particularly harsh or unpopular views may be silenced by the majority vote. This is a real issue that needs to be considered. However, in our experience, the inductive process of story selection (voting first, then identifying the criteria) is more likely to identify and record the less-popular views than other techniques of monitoring and evaluation. Being required to choose one significant story over another seems to encourage surprisingly open and frank discussions.

At a broader level, MSC maintains a diversity of views rather than striving for consensus. The risk of one story type dominating is mitigated by the fact that at each selection level new MSC stories are introduced from other sources. Even after the most significant changes from each domain have been selected by the most senior staff (or the donor), some branches of the organisation will still view other stories as more significant. MSC does not produce an absolute consensus. It is based on contending stories and ongoing debate about their merits.

"The Wisdom of Crowds"

"Diversity and independence are important because the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus or compromise … Paradoxically, the best way for a group to be smart is for each person to think and act as independently as possible." ***(The Wisdom of Crowds, Suroweicki, 2004: xix)***

Bias towards the views of those who are good at telling stories

Like all monitoring and evaluation techniques, MSC favours some types of data over others. MSC has the unusual bias of favouring the views of people who can tell a good story. This is another good reason for not seeing MSC as a stand-alone tool for monitoring and evaluation. However, we have seen cases where participants in the selection process were aware that storytelling skills could have an undue influence, and so they adjusted their assessment of stories accordingly.

Issues of voice and power in MSC

In MSC, many staff, donors and other stakeholders (including participants in some cases) can become actively involved in collecting and analysing data. MSC is one of the most participatory monitoring and evaluation techniques available. However, in terms of who gets a voice, it can be argued that MSC favours the inclusion of some stakeholders over others.

The story selection process is inherently biased in favour of those people who attend the story review sessions. The people attending the review panels may not be fully representative of the wider voice of staff or beneficiaries. This can be offset to some extent by having a representative spread of people involved in selecting stories, or having parallel selection panels representing different interest groups.

Nonetheless, MSC is embedded within the discourse of the project staff and members of the selection panels. It does not deliberately attempt to capture the opinions of those who choose not to participate. This is a real issue, especially when using MSC for summative evaluation, but we deal with this by combining MSC with other techniques, such as semi-structured interviews that seek the views of non-participants or critics. Another possibility is that a researcher could seek out stories from antagonists and include them in the MSC review process.

However, MSC does employ some mechanisms for balancing unequal voices in organisations. As the process usually sits in a highly visible power structure, all judgments are made much more public than they might otherwise be. Those at the top of the hierarchy have to choose from menus of options created by those below them. Finally, the optional 'any other changes' domain opens up the breadth of change that can be placed on the menu. Although the choices are never entirely free, because they occur in an organisational context, MSC gives a greater voice to those at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy than is the case with many conventional monitoring and evaluation systems.

In VSO, SC stories that involve and have been validated by other parties in addition to the volunteer writing the story are frequently rated as more significant than those written by the volunteer without reference to other stakeholders' views. This suggests that the process of selecting SC stories, if managed properly, can help address the risks of participating staff reporting stories that are, intentionally or unintentionally, self-serving.

Chapter Seven: **How MSC Compares To Other Approaches and Epistemologies**

We believe that MSC can be successfully implemented without a strong understanding of the theory. If you just want to know about the practicalities, you may not need to read this chapter. But for those readers who enjoy a foray into theory, this chapter examines validity in MSC and how it fits with other approaches and epistemologies.

Appreciative inquiry

MSC has been likened to 'appreciative inquiry' (Hammond, 1996). Ford and Ashford (2000) describe MSC as an example of how appreciative inquiry (AI) can be used in monitoring and evaluation.

Appreciative inquiry is essentially a package of approaches used to study organisational change and community development. It has a complex philosophy that engages the entire organisational system in an inquiry about what works. A central part of AI—and a facet of MSC—is to look at what works and determine how to do more of what works. In principle, MSC looks at positive and negative changes, but in practice the bias towards the positive may mean the differences between MSC and AI are not so pronounced. The principles of AI could equally be applied to MSC.

Unlike MSC, AI is not necessarily a continuous process, although it can be ongoing. AI involves a visioning process about the future and MSC does not. MSC uses structured selection processes and AI does not. In terms of the program management cycle, AI is more relevant to the planning stage, whereas MSC is more relevant to the monitoring and evaluation stages.

Participatory monitoring and evaluation

MSC could be considered a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation: an umbrella term that describes various types of participatory M&E conducted in the development sector. However, MSC differs from many other forms of PM&E in that MSC data is in the form of text-based accounts of reported changes. The way the MSC approach involves participatory analysis and selection of stories appears to be unique. MSC also differs in the extent to which it uses existing organisational power structures instead of trying to reach conclusions through the use of more *ad hoc* and egalitarian processes.

Case studies and vignettes

Like case studies, anecdotes and vignettes used in reports and evaluations, MSC generates data in the form of text. All these methods are similar in that they often involve thick description (description that is rich in context) or stories.

However, in most evaluations that use case studies and vignettes, the reader does not know:

- **who** selected the story, and what their role was
- **how** they selected the story – from how many others and over what period
- **why** they chose this story over other stories.

The MSC approach generates thick descriptions about change on a systematic, transparent and accountable basis.

Evolutionary epistemology and MSC

Rick's writings about MSC within the discourse of development studies and organisational learning have been informed by a body of theory known as evolutionary epistemology (Campbell, 1969). Within evolutionary epistemology, evolution is seen as a learning process, and learning by individuals is seen as a subset of this process. Learning is defined as the *selective retention of information*, and information is defined as 'differences that make a difference' (after Bateson, 1979).

The core of the evolutionary learning process is what is known as the evolutionary algorithm, which involves the reiteration of variation, selection and retention processes. This can be seen in both organic and cultural evolution. Populations of animals contain diverse characteristics; some of these confer survival advantages to the animals concerned and thus are selectively retained over time. Those animals reproduce, and a diversity of characteristics will again emerge among their descendants. Similarly, in cultural evolution, the meaning of a given event (e.g. circumcision) may be interpreted in a variety of ways by people. Some of those interpretations may have a better fit with the world view of the people concerned, and thus become more prevalent than other views held in the past. Within this newly dominant view, further variations of interpretations may emerge, and so on.

The MSC process within CCDB was an attempt to design a structured social process that embodied the three elements of the evolutionary algorithm: variation, selection and retention, reiterated through time. The entities subject to selection were events, and the associated interpretations of these events. The environment in which the process was taking place was the organisation using MSC. Selection took place when field staff selectively identified what they saw as significant changes. These changes (and interpretations of them) were then retained through being documented and communicated to others further up the organisational hierarchy. When grouped together at that next level, these accounts (and interpretations) recreated a diversity, which was then subjected to further selection, and then the retention of the most significant of all these significant changes. The SC stories that survived through this iterated process were those that fit the organisation best, in terms of its values, concerns and aspirations, at that moment in time.

This process involved two levels of selection processes that relate to the concept of first and second order learning, which was originally developed by Bateson. First order learning involves the selection of those changes which have the best fit with a given organisational value, or set of values, such as the importance of increasing beneficiaries' control over the use of development aid. Second order learning involves the selection of some values from

among others, which have the best fit within the organisation, according to any higher order concerns – for example, the very survival of the organisation. There can also be an element of self-organised selection here as well, as some values may be more consistent with each other than others, and therefore more likely to be retained over time.

As with organic evolution, there is no guarantee of 'good' outcomes from this type of learning process. The 'difference that makes a difference' is that unlike many evolutionary processes, the MSC process is *transparent*. By increasing the visibility of existing processes of organisational observation and judgment, there is more room for participants to make conscious choices about change. And these choices become available to a wider section of the organisation than might normally be the case.

MSC under a constructivist lens

With a background in program evaluation, Jess tends to frame MSC within the constructivists' subjective epistemology, focusing on the process of increasing stakeholder understanding of the program and the way others view it. For example, in MSC, stakeholders interpret their experiences with a program and record stories about instances they consider to represent the most significant change. They also record why they consider this change significant. Therefore when a beneficiary tells a story of significant change, she or he interacts with the world and draws meaning from it, and it is in the telling of the story that meaning is constructed. Then when reviewers read and evaluate the story, they engage with it and construct a further new meaning. When this is done in a group, construction is shared. In MSC, the criteria used to interpret a story are clearly documented, made transparent and kept with the story. This transparency makes the whole process even more open to new and more sophisticated constructions of meaning, because in MSC we know who selected each story, in what context, and for what reason.

However, MSC also includes a verification stage in which the stories can be amplified and checked to see if the events they describe really occurred. This suggests that MSC cannot be conceptualised under a radical constructivist ontology, where 'facts' are considered to be a function of multiple realities as much as values. For these reasons, Jess suggests that MSC is best described as employing a constructivist epistemology and a realist ontology. Rick concurs with the description, and adds an ironic twist suggesting that the MSC is a form of 'practical postmodernism'.

MSC has also been likened to some of the constructivist evaluation approaches referred to in the international program evaluation literature. One of the best known constructivist approaches is Fourth Generation Evaluation (FGE) (Guba & Lincoln 1989). FGE and MSC both assume that program stakeholders have different values that need to be explored during evaluation, but use different methodologies. While both are participatory, dialogical approaches, FGE is not usually conducted as a ongoing process and does not explicitly involve the collection of stories. It has also been argued that FGE tends to be more of a theoretical position than a practical methodology (Fishman, 1992). MSC was and is developing through practice; having been implemented numerous times throughout its evolution, it is certainly practical in orientation.

Chapter Eight: **The History of MSC**

History as process

It is more than ten years since Rick first developed MSC in Bangladesh. Since then, a wide range of organisations have experimented with MSC and some have continued to use it. In the process of applying MSC to different organisational contexts, the design has been modified. Within each application, the details of MSC design have often been adapted in the light of experience.

MSC has spread in a very decentralised way. For example, no single donor has said that MSC must be used in any project designs that it will fund. Since Jess completed her PhD on MSC in 2000, MSC has been actively promoted in Australia by her involvement in the Australian Evaluation Society, publication of journal articles and the training she has provided to a large number of interested organisations. More globally, the spread of MSC has been facilitated by the establishment of the MSC mailing list, along with an associated file repository in 2001. The file repository now contains 18 folders detailing MSC uses in 10 countries. The usefulness of MSC was recently made evident in an excellent ADRA MSC guide, which was developed by Robyn Kerr (Kerr, 2004) almost solely on the basis of the documentation she found at ADRA Laos.

The Guide you are now reading is also a step towards more active facilitation, in that we are trying to selectively summarise and disseminate some of the lessons from the last ten years. We have tried to apply a light touch, avoiding where possible the imposition of compulsory practices and stressing the alternatives that are available when applying MSC.

Types of MSC uses

Table 3 provides a chronological history of the uses of MSC that we have been able to identify so far. You can find documents describing many of these applications on the MSC website at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MostSignificantChanges/

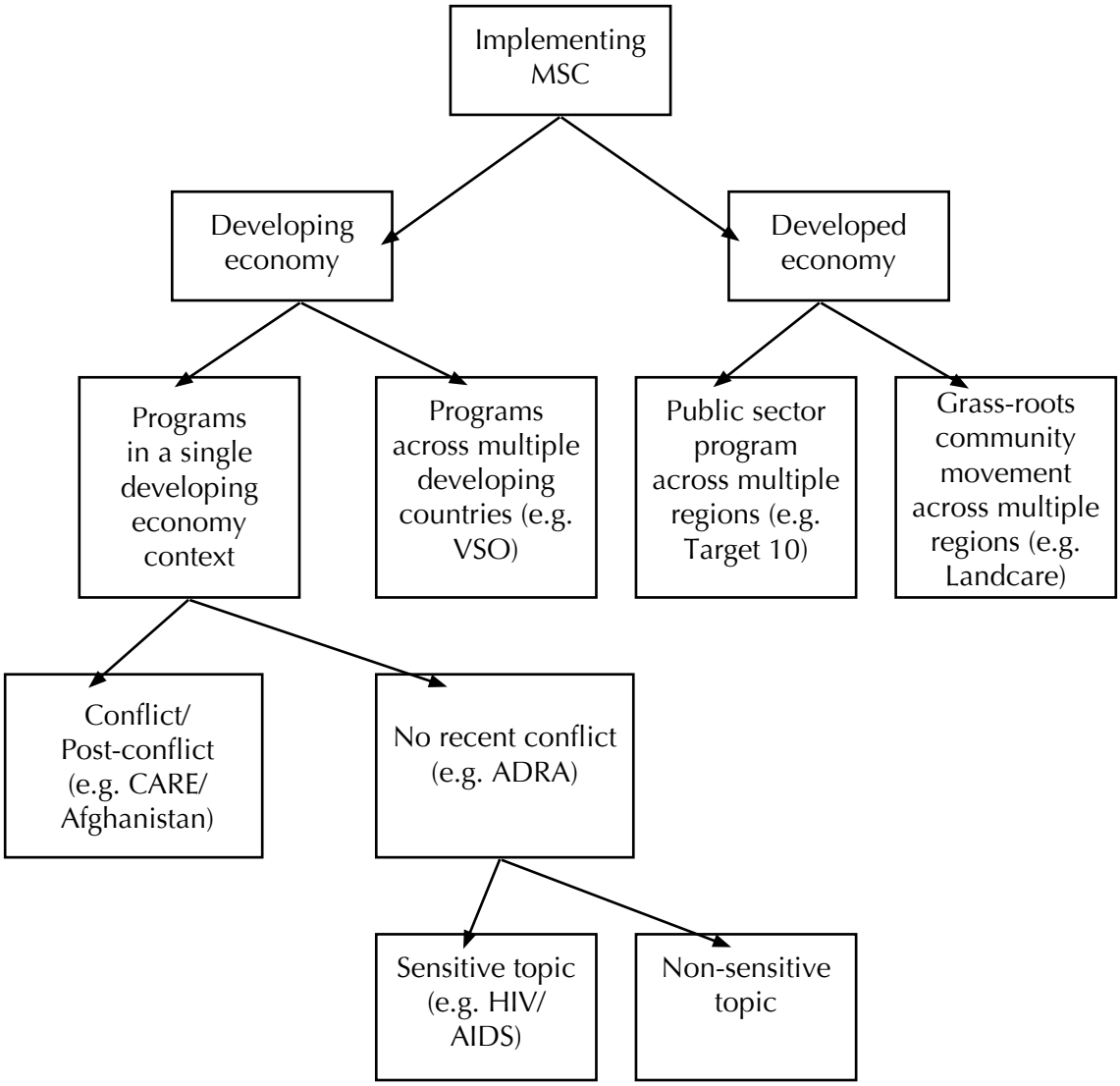
The following section identifies some of the most important differences between these applications, especially the types of settings in which MSC has been used. We have then tried to identify the consequences or implications of those differences. The classification process is a 'work in progress' because the information we have for many applications of MSC is incomplete.

Table 3: Known applications of MSC

Year	Country	Organisation	Program	Informant
	Philippines	USAID	'Governance and Local Democracy' project	Terry Bergdall
1993	Malawi	Government of Malawi		Rick Davies
1994	Bangladesh	CCDB	People's Participatory Rural Development Program	Rick Davies
1994	Ethiopia	SIDA	Community Empowerment Program	Terry Bergdall
1996	Multiple countries	ITDG, UK	Global program	Helen Wedgewood
1996	India	Aga Khan Foundation	Aga Khan Rural Support Program	Barry Underwood
1997	Australia	Department of Primary Industries, Victoria.	Target 10	Jess Dart
1998	Mozambique	Oxfam		
1998	Philippines		Safe Motherhood Program	Leslie Dove
2000	Multiple countries	VSO	Global program	
2001	Ghana	DFID	Brong Ahafo District Support Program	Francis Johnston
2001	Pacific Islands	IDSS/AusAid	Pacific Children's Program	Kerin Winterford
2001	Mozambique	MS Denmark	Country program	Peter Sigsgaard
2001	Zambia	MS Denmark	Country program	Peter Sigsgaard
2001	Australia	Department of Victorian Communities (formerly DPI)	Bestwool	Jess Dart
2002	Multiple countries	MS Denmark	Country program	Peter Sigsgaard
2002	Laos	ADRA		Robyn Keriger
2002	Tanzania		Country program	Peter Sigsgaard
2002	Thailand		STREAM	Pat Norrish
2003	Papua New Guinea	Oxfam New Zealand	Oxfam New Zealand Bougainville Program	Jess Dart
2003	Ghana	CARE	Country program	Fiona Percy
2003	Central America	Ibis Denmark	Country programs	Silke Mason Westphal
2003	Australia	S.A Dept. of Education	Learning to Learn	Margot Foster
2003	Australia	Landcare	Landcare statewide	Jess Dart
2003	Multiple countries	Oxfam Australia		Deb Elkington
2004	Australia	Desert Knowledge CRC	National body	Jess Dart
2004	Serbia	SIDA		Terry Bergdall
2004	Australia	Landcare	North Central Landcare	Jess Dart
2004	Australia		Creatively Connecting Communities	Jess Dart

The 'differences that make a difference' in implementing MSC

Figure 3. The central differences in program context that we believe have affected the way MSC has been implemented to date



Key difference 1: Use of MSC in 'developed' versus 'developing' countries

Some of the most obvious differences occur between implementing MSC in a developing economy and implementing it in a developed economy. The differences are vast, and beyond the scope of this Guide, so we highlight only three: cross-cultural communication, specialisation in the program context, and levels of power and social capital.

Cross-cultural communication

MSC has been used in a wide range of developing countries including Bangladesh, Brazil, Mozambique, Tanzania, Ghana, Philippines and Laos. A key challenge in these contexts was the cross-cultural communication of what MSC is all about: the idea of monitoring without

indicators, the meaning of 'significance' and the need to exercise individual judgment. In many cases, there was also the challenge of translating guidance notes into the national or local language and translating the documented MSC stories into English, Danish or another language used by the foreign aid agency. In contrast, when MSC has been introduced into organisations based in Australia and the UK, there have been no language problems and relatively few cultural problems.

Specialisation of program focus

A common difference between the development context and the developed economy context may well be the diversity or specialisation of focus of the programs themselves. Implementation of MSC in developing economies has largely focused on *development*. In developed economies, the programs implementing MSC have focused on such diverse things as the way students learn, practice change in dairy farming, healthier desert communities, natural resource management, increasing wool production, and strengthening communities and employment.

Levels of power and social capital of the program participants

A central difference for MSC in developed and developing economies relates to the levels of human and social capital of the program participants. In developed countries, it has perhaps been easier to involve program participants in all levels of MSC than is the case in developing countries. For example, in the Target 10 dairy extension project in Victoria, Australia, community participants were represented at every level of story selection, including the roundtable meeting of funders and key influencers. This is because community stakeholders tend to have more power and voice in developed economies.

Key difference 2: The extent to which participants in developed economy settings are involved in analysing stories

Within developed economies, a key variable in MSC applications has been the extent to which community members have participated. In two Australian cases—the Best wool project and some Victorian regions of the Landcare project—the first selection of documented SC stories was done by community landholders in large group forums. Both initiatives are highly participatory, being largely run by the landholder participants. Landcare, for instance, is not an agency-controlled program, but a grassroots movement of community land-managers who meet regularly, apply for government funding and corporate sponsorship for projects, and sometimes employ facilitators.

This suggests that the degree to which participants can be involved in analysing stories is strongly related to the extent to which the organisation or movement is participatory or 'bottom-up' in structure.

Key difference 3: Multiple-country applications versus single-country applications

Some aid organisations have used MSC to monitor changes taking place across a range of country programs (including VSO, ITDG, MS Denmark and Ibis Denmark). Others have focused on monitoring changes within one country or a single program within one country (e.g. CARE Ghana, ADRA Laos and CCDB Bangladesh).

The multi-country applications have been the most challenging of all uses of MSC, particularly in the case of VSO, which works in 35 countries. VSO asks every volunteer to complete a MSC report at the end of their two-year placement. These reports are reviewed and selected annually at country, regional and global levels. Because the selection process is annual, there are fewer opportunities for VSO staff to learn about MSC through repeated practice than in most other applications, where three-monthly reporting and selection cycles are common. A second complication is that each year a new group of volunteers must be told about MSC and asked to complete a report at the end of their placement.

A third difficulty, which is shared by all organisations using MSC on a global scale, is enrolling all country programs as voluntary and willing participants in the process. This can be difficult enough with individual staff members of individual programs. At a global level, country program managers often have substantial autonomy, so gaining their interest and willing involvement is a special challenge. Not surprisingly, the level of compliance and active engagement with MSC varies across countries within VSO.

Nonetheless, cross-country programs are likely to encounter these same problems implementing any common monitoring and evaluation program. It could also be said that MSC is extremely useful in these contexts as it allows value pluralism and the chance to talk about these differences and make sense of them. Indeed, despite difficulties, VSO has four years experience with MSC and continues to use it.

Key difference 4: Times of relative peace versus conflict and post-conflict

In developing countries, most single-country applications of MSC have been in the context of development aid programs. We know of only one application in more of an emergency context. This is the use of MSC by CARE Afghanistan, as introduced by Jon Kurtz, whose Master's thesis includes chapters on his experimentation with MSC in Afghanistan. The introduction of MSC was used as a basis for understanding the influence of both organisational and contextual factors on organisational learning within the humanitarian emergency sector. According to Kurtz (2003:73), 'experimentation with the method yielded insights into staff perceptions of the overall purposes and value of M&E – a critical factor affecting the ability of M&E to generate learning'. Kurtz concludes that 'the MSC method appeared to build well on, and provide some much needed structure, to our previous efforts to improve qualitative M&E'. You can find these chapters in the MSC file repository at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MostSignificantChanges/files/

We argue that MSC should be useful in emergency contexts because what it can provide is close to a 'real time' impact assessment (for example, in terms of effects on people's lives). It can also provide more frequent opportunities to steer an intervention in the appropriate direction, through periodic feedback on the stories identified as most significant of all. In an emergency context, a shorter reporting period such as weekly or monthly would be preferred to the quarterly cycle often used in development projects.

We know of one use of MSC in a post-conflict context, by Jess in Bougainville. Bougainville was subject to a prolonged civil war in the late 1990s. The number of casualties is unknown, but it is estimated that deaths and injuries were proportionately among the highest in the world. Jess used MSC as part of an impact assessment of Oxfam New Zealand's interventions during and after the war. Every post-conflict situation is unique, and most tend to be extremely dynamic in the first decade of peace. Therefore interventions need to evolve as the context becomes better understood and the situation changes. A responsive

program design that can adapt to these changes requires regular reflection and course correction. In the Oxfam New Zealand Bougainville program, the objectives changed five times over a five-year period! MSC seemed particularly appropriate because it is a form of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) that is not based solely on checking to see whether the original objectives have been met. The judgments made in MSC are more about whether significant changes are being achieved; the criteria used to determine the *significance* of the changes can themselves change over time.

Key difference 5: Degree of sensitivity of the program focus

As well as the more typical implementation in rural development context, MSC has also been applied to more 'socially sensitive' topics. For example, it has been used on a Safe Motherhood project in the Philippines, a child welfare project in the Pacific and an HIV/AIDS program in South East Asia. The use of MSC in the latter two contexts has raised important questions about privacy, confidentiality and appropriate methods for eliciting stories in sensitive subject areas. For example, asking for SC stories about 'other people' that the respondent knows about could in fact elicit stories about the respondent. There are also concerns about the most appropriate means of verifying MSC stories in these contexts.

Chapter Nine: **New Directions for MSC**

MSC is still evolving and while we make some suggestions for improving the technique, you may well find other useful ways to improve MSC or adapt it to different contexts. We invite you to join us in exploring how MSC can be further developed and creatively combined with other techniques and approaches in evaluation.

This chapter outlines some possible future directions for MSC. We begin by considering some ways to fine-tune MSC, discuss how you could creatively combine MSC with other approaches, and look at some innovations to the MSC process.

Fine tuning

In our experience, MSC can be fine-tuned by developing methods for:

- incorporating insights into program planning
- eliciting the views of program critics
- participatory analysis of stories en masse
- improving the feedback process.

Incorporating insights into program planning

MSC can lead to bigger improvements to programs when there is a formal process for incorporating the lessons learned from the stories into both long-term and short-term program planning. You can encourage this in the short term by asking those selecting MSC stories whether they can offer any recommendations for action as a result of the story they have selected. If the SC stories contain critical information (i.e. information about differences that make a difference), the best SC stories will have made differences that continue on into the future. To date, only one or two MSC report formats have included a recommendations section. We now believe it should be used more widely, if not in all MSC applications.

Another way to enhance the impact of MSC on program improvement is to have periodic 'reflections' that lead into formal program revisions. In 2004, Oxfam Australia held a series of annual reflections across all programs to focus on examining what significant changes had occurred.

Including a process to elicit the views of critics

MSC does not deliberately set out to capture the opinions of community members who chose not to participate in a program, and may not give voice to critics of the program. Combining MSC with a process that sought out program critics would offset this bias and provide a more comprehensive evaluation outcome. The selection process could include stories collected from critics or have critics participate in the selection panels.

Another option is to expand or modify the range of groups who select winning stories. There is no reason to restrict story selection to those with program responsibilities (e.g. staff groups, steering committees and investor groups). It would be possible, for example, to

involve members of the public in discussion about which stories they did and did not value. Conducting part of the MSC process on the Internet would enable many more people to be involved in voting for stories and explaining the different reasons behind their views. Some organisations that use MSC (including VSO, CWS Indonesia) have started to place their SC stories on the Internet. This process could take place either in parallel or after the process has been completed within the implementing organisation.

Participatory analysis of stories en masse

Nominated stakeholders could periodically analyse the stories en masse, in addition to making judgments about the relative merit of selected groups of stories. In other words, secondary analysis could be conducted in a participatory manner. For example, designated stakeholders could help to identify major themes arising from the whole spectrum of stories, including those not selected. This could form the basis of a whole program 'reflection' with documented recommendations that lead directly into program planning.

Improving the feedback process

This process could be done better by ensuring that someone always accompanies the results back to the story providers at the level below, rather than just sending them by document alone. At these meetings, the story providers could be asked to guess which SC was selected as most significant of all. This will raise their interest immediately. The messenger should then inform them which SC was actually selected, and why. If this is different from the prediction, then it is highly likely that there will be some animated discussions about the differences in perspective between these providers and the people who selected stories at the next level. The messenger will be able to feed back the essence of this discussion to that group. These suggestions are based on Rick's one positive experience with feeding back results of an impact assessment survey, on the same basis: asking for predictions of expected responses, revealing the actual responses, then discussing the differences.

Combining with other approaches

MSC has different strengths and weaknesses to conventional methods of monitoring and evaluation. It is therefore a good tool to combine with other methods and can be used effectively as one of several methods chosen to offset different biases and meet the full evaluation requirements. Evaluation approaches that would complement MSC could include those that provide:

- quantitative evidence of the spread of emergent outcomes
- evidence of the achievement of predetermined outcomes (if these have been articulated)
- evidence of the 'average' experience of participants (or of subgroups of participants) as well as exceptional outcomes
- information on the views of non-participants and other 'victims' of the program
- improved knowledge with regard to the logic of the program intervention
- evidence of whether desired outcomes have been achieved, in what situations and why.

UK – MSC can work with indicators

"The POEMS [read MSC] system and the intelligent use of indicators are not contradictory. POEMS can suggest and highlight appropriate indicators of impact that could then be employed in a more 'formal' impact assessment, or be built back into the system as new domains." ***(Wedgwood and Bush, 1996:5, ITDG)***

Using MSC alongside program logic to create a comprehensive monitoring, evaluation and learning framework

In the last two years, Jess has coached several organisations to integrate MSC alongside 'program logic' and reflections. Firstly, Jess facilitates program staff to develop a program logic model to help them come to a shared understanding of who their programs are targeting, and the underlying logic and expectations of their work with these people. The program logic then guides the type of evidence they need to collect in order to tell the story of their progress in achieving the intermediate impacts. This will establish a picture of how the program has contributed to the ultimate outcomes. However, this is only one side of the story – it only tells us the extent to which the program has achieved its *expected* outcomes. MSC supplements this by helping program staff to search for emergent instances of significant change (as seen by the participants) and come to an agreement on the value of these changes. The third component of this model is to combine these two approaches in a program of regular reflection.

Figure 4 shows the relationship between program logic, MSC and annual reflection. The annual reflection examines whether there is alignment between the project-centric logic model and what MSC reveals. It asks: *'What impact is our work having in general?'* and *'Is it the right thing to do?'* as well as *'Are we doing what we said we would do?'* The annual reflection is used to revise the program logic model and make recommendations for changes in direction to be incorporated into the annual planning process.

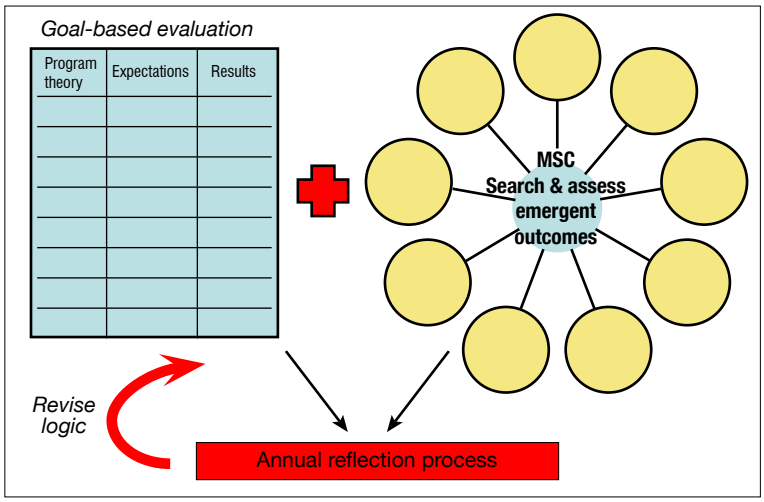


Figure 4. How program logic, MSC and the annual reflection process work together

Innovations

Network alternatives

Using a hierarchy of selection processes to summarise-by-selection a large range of program experiences fits reasonably well with the hierarchical structure of most organisations. However, it is becoming more common to see development programs involving multiple partners, and networks of stakeholders with various kinds of linkages to each other. Many have a voluntary membership and many do not have a simple hierarchy of authority. In these settings, summary-by-selection processes require more careful thought. When a group selects a most significant SC story from those provided by its members, who should it then feed the story to? In some cases there may be elected management structures that could be used, but in many cases there will not.

The alternative, which seems to have been used in one application of MSC in Papua New Guinea (Reid, 2004), is that results of different stakeholder group's selections are fed into each other, for a second round of reflection, and possible readjustment of their original judgments. This process can be repeated, until each stakeholder group's judgment stabilises. This approach is consistent with some theoretical work on the nature of selection processes in self-organising systems (Kauffman, 1995). The potential downside of this approach is that it would be a more time-consuming process. In this context it is worth noting that the PNG application was in the context of an evaluation, not an ongoing monitoring process.

A more radical use of SC stories is being proposed within the ADB 'Making Markets Work Better for the Poor' (MMWB4P) project in Vietnam. A communications strategy has been developed to ensure that research findings are communicated to and used by policy makers. Project office staff will collect SC stories from the funded researchers they are in contact with, and from participants in dissemination workshops. These stories will be used for two purposes. Firstly, to develop a better understanding of the relevant *policy-making process* (this will be an MSC domain). Secondly, the contents and sources of these MSC stories may shed light on the network of connections that exists between policy makers and the project. In the original use of MSC by CCDB, a structure was deliberately set up in advance to enable filtering of SC stories. In the ADB project, the SC stories that become available will be used to uncover existing structures. One of the first SC stories to be documented is shown in the box below. This is one part of a wider jigsaw puzzle, with the surrounding parts yet to be found.

Vietnam – SC stories as jigsaw pieces: how do they connect?

"The MMWB4P Project Office received a fax copy of a page of Hansard covering some parliamentary Q&A dated 29 November. There is a section on Vietnam with Mr Alexander, a representative of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), being quizzed about what the UK is doing to help Vietnam become a market-based economy. Mr Alexander's reply has a whole paragraph on the MMWB4P project ending with 'For further information on this intervention, I refer my hon. friend to the Making Markets Work Better for the Poor website: www.markets4poor.org". *(Rick Davies, 2004)*

(The MMWB4P Project Office does not yet know how the FCO representative knew about their project.)

MSC for process monitoring

A recent innovation is to use MSC to monitor changes in management processes within aid programs. In Bangladesh, the Social Investment Program has contracted a third party to monitor the processes used to help plan and fund community-level development initiatives. MSC is one of the methods the contractor will use. Instead of significant changes in beneficiaries' lives, however, the MSC participants (including program beneficiaries) will be asked to identify stories about changes in the way the program is being implemented: for example, how program staff work with villagers to develop annual development plans, or how grants are disbursed to fund those plans.

MSC and large groups

Jess has experimented with using MSC in large group contexts in a short timeframe, as an alternative to stories being generated and selected by small discrete groups of people. Storytelling is conducive to large group settings and feedback from participants indicates that the forums have been well received. This is also a good way to encourage beneficiaries to be more centrally involved in the selection and collection process. However, it may not be appropriate in every cultural or programmatic context, as it does tend to be very public.

For example, in 2002, Jess facilitated MSC at a forum with 90 wool producers sitting in groups of around seven people. Each group was asked to discuss any changes that they felt had resulted from the program. They then selected the most significant of all these changes, and recounted this story to the large group along with the reasons why their group selected that story above the others. A microphone was used to ensure everyone heard the stories, which were also recorded. The atmosphere was very excited, and people embraced the opportunity to tell their stories to the whole group. That night the stories were hastily transcribed and documented. A stakeholder steering committee re-read the stories the next day, selected the most significant and fed the results back to the participants in the minutes of the workshop. These forums were conducted in three different regions, and were to be repeated in following years.

MSC in strategic planning

In 2004, Jess experimented with a combination of appreciative inquiry and MSC for strategic planning, using large group processes. The process had two positive outcomes. The resulting strategic plan was realistic and grounded in experience to a greater extent than the average strategic plan. The other positive outcome was the high degree of ownership of the strategic plan.

For example, MSC was used to help develop a strategic plan for the Landcare Support Program in the North Central Region of Victoria. Around 70 volunteers (half of whom were 'beneficiaries') went into the community and interviewed a wide range of people that they felt had important views about Landcare, including young people, mayors, agency staff and landholders. The resulting 140 stories were screened by a steering committee before being analysed at a two-day community forum attended by 80 people, mainly beneficiaries. Participants were divided into groups of around eight people and asked to read a unique pile of stories, with at least one story per domain, and to distil from each story 'what Landcare is when it is at its very best'. They attached removable self-adhesive notes to each story in response to this question. Each group then chose the most significant story from its pile and read this out to the large group, along with the reasons for the choice.

The facilitators then grouped the self-adhesive notes that distilled 'what Landcare is when it is at its very best' into 11 key success factors and an artist drew a picture to represent each of these. Together with the eight examples (i.e. stories) of what was valued, and the reasons why, the key success factors were used to ensure that success factors were included in the strategic plan. This involved developing a vision and identifying actions along the lines of a more typical Appreciative Inquiry approach. The story analysis component of the summit took around three hours and was well received by all participants.

MSC as a participatory component of summative evaluation

MSC can be used to ensure participatory values are included in summative evaluation

Summative evaluations typically involve an external evaluator interviewing a range of people, collecting secondary evidence and making observations. The external evaluator then considers the evidence and makes judgments about the extent to which the program was worthwhile and how it could be improved. Ultimately the process depends on the evaluator using their best judgment (based to some degree on their own values; they are human after all) to assess the merit and worth of a program. But in highly participatory programs, is it appropriate for an external evaluator to judge what constitutes success? MSC can help extract local success criteria that may be more appropriate than the success criteria developed by an outsider.

For example, in 2004, Jess conducted an external evaluation of the Oxfam New Zealand Bougainville Program (ONZBP), which was on the verge of becoming Osi Tanata, an independent Bougainvillian NGO. Because Jess felt that it would be inappropriate to conduct an entirely external evaluation of what is now an autonomous local institution, she recommended that the evaluation include some elements of participatory evaluation based on the values of the local team. Program staff collected 17 significant change stories and the evaluator (Jess) collected eight as a cross-check.

All stories were collected with the help of an interview guide, with notes being written down and then read back to the informant for verification. The staff and a small number of beneficiaries selected the most significant of the 25 stories. The evaluator used the success criteria identified by staff as the main themes in the evaluation report. In addition to the MSC process, the evaluator interviewed 23 key informants and 12 community members in Bougainville, including some critics of the program. The final evaluation report used extracts from the SC stories and quotations from the interviews to illustrate the key findings.

Modifications to sampling process in MSC for use in summative evaluation

A potential limitation for MSC in summative evaluation is that it captures the most significant stories – the most successful cases. Summative evaluation generally requires data on the spread of impact across different participant groups. With ONZBP, this limitation was addressed by first classifying the projects as very good, good, not so good, etc. Projects were then selected at random from each category, and staff collected MSC stories from these project locations. In other words, the evaluation used 'stratified purposive sampling' rather than random sampling.

Future research areas

We know of two completed PhD theses (Jess and Rick) and two Master's degree theses (Jon Kurtz, 2003; Bettina Ringsing, 2003) that deal with MSC. We believe MSC offers plenty of scope for further research, particularly in the following areas:

- the proportion of MSC applications that are really about unexpected changes, and what factors most influence this proportion: for example, cultural, organisational, program design and MSC design factors
- what factors have the most influence over the percentage of negative stories that are reported, and how controllable these factors are
- how to strengthen the feedback loop, which is known to be a weak link in the MSC process
- how to strengthen the link between the MSC dialogue and program planning
- how to strengthen MSC for use in summative evaluation
- combining MSC with deductive approaches that develop a program logic.

An invitation to innovate, review and communicate

Every organisation that uses MSC introduces some innovations. Every application inevitably requires fine tuning and adaptation of the MSC process to the local context and specific program objectives. Some of these changes will make MSC more useful, some will not. The value of these experiments will be magnified if the methods and results can be documented and shared with other users of MSC.

We encourage you to:

- join the MSC mailing list to learn more about other people's experiences. Please introduce yourself and explain who you are, what you are doing and what you are interested in
- document your planned use of MSC. This could include noting the rationale for its use, and recording the guidelines for how it is to be used
- review your actual use of MSC and document your conclusions, especially after a pilot period and preferably at regular intervals
- make your MSC documentation available via the MSC mailing list and through other means such as your website.

In return, we will try to condense the lessons learned from this growing body of experience, and produce a revised version of this Guide within the next three years.

Happy trails

Rick and Jess
February 2005

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Appendix 1

Sample Story Collection Formats

1.1 Landcare (The Mallee Landcare Support Strategy)

Background

The Mallee Landcare Coordinators and Facilitators would like to capture stories of significant change that may have resulted from their work with Landcare in this region. This will help us to improve what we are doing, enable us to celebrate the successes together as well as being accountable to our funders.

The stories and information collected from these interviews will be used for a number of purposes including:

- to explore what Coordinators and Facilitators together with Landcare groups in the Mallee have achieved already
- to help Facilitators and Coordinators understand what people in Landcare value, and support more of these sorts of outcomes
- to acknowledge and publicise what has already been achieved.

Contact details

Confidentiality

We may like to use your stories for reporting to our funders, or sharing with other people in the region – such as other people in other Landcare groups.

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 ☐

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 'landholder' or some similar description.)***

Questions

1. Tell me how you (the storyteller) first became involved with Landcare and what your current involvement is:

2. From your point of view, describe a story that epitomises the most significant change that has resulted from Landcare in the Mallee

3. Why was this story significant for you?

4. How, (if at all) has the work of the Landcare Facilitators and/or Coordinators contributed to this?

1.2 VSO (Volunteer Report Form)

VSO FINAL REPORT – Part 2 (Volunteer Report):

to be completed by the volunteer after the final Programme Office visit to the placement

Volunteer name:	Volunteer ref & country recruited:
Job title:	Job ref:
Employer:	Country:
Name of volunteer's line manager:	Volunteer start of service date:

- Please use dark (preferably black) ink and use extra paper if you wish.
- The main purpose of this form is to enable VSO to understand and learn from volunteers' experience in their placements.
- The report may also be used for briefing by future volunteers and extracts may be given to funders or used by VSO in publicity material (as explained in the volunteer handbook)
- If you wish to make confidential comments, please do so on a separate sheet of paper specifying from whom they should be confidential. VSO will ensure that they are treated with the confidentiality you require.
- Any issues arising from the placement should be discussed with your employer or programme office. If you feel an issue has not been dealt with reasonably by the programme office you may write to your Regional Programme Manager at VSO.UK.

1(a) Describe what you think is the most significant change that you contributed to, in some way, during your placement.

- Where possible, choose the most significant change after discussions with your employer, colleagues and programme officer.
- There may have been many changes, great and small, positive and negative. Choose the change that you feel is most significant.
- Describe who was involved, what happened, where and when.
- Include enough detail to make it understandable by someone not familiar with your placement and to make it possible to follow up later to see if the change has continued.
- If choosing one change is too difficult, feel free to describe more than one (using further forms).
- The significant change you choose can be in:
    - the lives of the beneficiaries of the organisation with which you worked,
    - the lives of individuals in the community where you lived,
    - colleagues with whom you worked,
    - an aspect of the organisation with which you worked, or
    - the wider policy environment

(b) Explain why you chose this particular change.

- What difference has it made/will it make?
- Why do you think this difference is important?

(c) If anyone other than you was involved in choosing the story explain who and how.

(d) Are there any lessons for VSO arising from change you have written about?

(e) Give your "news story" a headline, summarising it in a few words.

Headline:

(a) Description:

(b) Explanation:

(c) Who chose the story?

(d) Lessons or recommendations for VSO:

Date report completed:

Appendix 2

Sample Significant Change Stories

2.1 Bougainville: Osi Tanata (NGO)

Significant Change Story

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 ☐

Contact Details

Name of person recording story	Wilson during MSC training
Name of storyteller*	Sebastin Kakau
Project and location	O'Kerry organic project – cycle 3
Date of recording	23th of March
When did it happen?	Over 1 year?
Title of story?	"Growing big"

Tell me how you (the storyteller) first became involved with Osi Tanata, and what your current involvement is:

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 TOT.

From your point of view, describe the most significant change that has resulted from your involvement with Osi Tanata (training/support or funding)

After the training I went back to my village and mobilized 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 their produces from their organic farm. For example, for a bed of cabbage, he is getting around K100. Now they have spent the money to buy clothes and many other basic needs. Apart from generating income the families and the surrounding villages have enough surplus to feed their family and others. Also some of the money is being used to start other projects such as a trade store.

Why is this significant to you?

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.

Domain: ❒ Changes in people's lives

2.2 VSO – Philippines: Angie Bamgbose

Volunteer Story:

At the beginning of the gender profiling, the team (volunteer and Maradeca staff and volunteers) were afraid that the communities would perceive the gender profiling activities as a process of Christian, Western indoctrination on Maranao communities.

During the gender profiling, in all communities, the team found very rigid gendered divisions of labour: crudely men were seen as the breadwinners and worked largely farming rice or fishing, while women worked managing the house in all communities. Women were not participative in community decision-making processes and their contributions to household income, household work, and role in peace negotiating among other things were overlooked.

The community of Dansalan was slightly different in that men were to some extent involved in childcare and women had a louder voice in community matters. This was a source of great shame for the women who cried when they described how they made decisions that "should be made by men". They felt embarrassed that they were undermining men's roles that have been ascribed by Islam and Maranao tradition. Dansalan has experienced many displacements over the last thirty years as a result of flooding, rido (family feuds), martial law and the conflicts between the military and rebels in 2000.

Maradeca and Obaera continued to work in the community and after five months the team returned to Dansalan to formally assess any changes since the gender profiling activities. Six men and eleven women gave feedback on the changes they believed had occurred in the community as a direct result of the gender profiling. This shows that the fear of gender profiling as being indoctrination of forced foreign values to divide the community did not come to fruition.

It was found that women have begun working with men to repair the boo (fishing cages). All activities associated with fishing had previously been a totally male domain. Men continue to engage in productive work and women here acknowledge that men are more actively involved in childcare, cooking and laundry. These are significant departures from the rigid gendered divisions of labour seen only a few months earlier.

Likewise, men said that they recognize that women's work is 'heavy' as women are involved in both housework and productive work, working in stores, mat weaving etc. Men and women in the community now work together in market gardening to augment the family income. It can be seen that gardens have significantly increased in size now that men and women are working together, not simply women alone.

Men said there have been many changes because they have gained many insights from the gender profiling, specifically for the need for men and women to work together. The community has new ideas; there is more motivation to work with women on income generating activities, e.g. carabao, gardening; people generally have more motivation to work, as they have been able to see that if they don't work (raise income) then they will not develop.

Both men and women acknowledged that women are included in community decision-making and sometimes make more decisions than men. In terms of planning and ideas it is the women that are ahead of men in making community developments. It should be remembered that in March women were crying as they described their lead in decision-making and now they are proud of it. In fact women said that they are involved in community decisions because they are 'intelligent and wise'!

A concrete example of how these issues interplay can be seen through women's new ownership of a carabao. A carabao is a water buffalo. Unless a woman is given carabaos as part of her dowry, she rarely has any role in managing them. Even if she gets carabaos as part of her dowry, she doesn't actually get the direct benefit as traditionally only men use these in their farm work.

In Dansalan, the women said that they felt more confident to organize themselves and develop after the gender profiling. Following the profiling, women felt more able to organize their resources and consider how to invest the profits from the Obaera store further. Obaera's cooperative has been so successful that they wanted to invest their capital in a small business that would provide additional income. The women decided to buy a carabao. The carabao is owned and controlled by the cooperative. Women use the carabao to help carry their goods from the road, which is about a 30-minute walk through rice fields; there is no road and this a long way to carry a 50kg sack of rice and other produce for the family and the store.

The men need to use carabaos in farming, and in this very poor community; they have to rent one at high cost from outside the community. Now the men don't have to go outside the community, they can simply ask their wife, sister, or daughter to rent the Obaera carabao. This represents a turn around of traditional gender roles with women being in control of a carabao and men having to ask women to use the carabao. In addition they have to pay the women rent.

Women use the income to further develop their cooperative, which then helps to meet their needs, the needs of the family and therefore community. Money stays in the community rather than going outside to line another person's pocket. What creativity and self-assurance these women have shown!

The next phase in this enterprising business is to breed from the carabao. Their carabao is female and they intend to use her to breed and they would either use this carabao for the Obaera members or to sell and get further income. Each month the profits are around P5, 000 ($100), a carabao costs around P15, 000 and so after a further three months they intend to buy another carabao for the Obaera members to continue to help with the marketing and to rent to men for their farming activities.

This relates to the cross-cutting theme of gender within the strategic aim of participation and governance.

Why did the volunteer choose this story:

The volunteer choose this story as I think that it clearly shows that gender profiling undertaken with sensitivity can create changes. Gender is not a static concept but rather a dynamic one that is continually shifting. Men and women who are able to see that a more gender equal society is a stronger one will embrace gender.

Many people are afraid of 'gender'; afraid to 'interfere' with culture and tradition, but a more equal and balanced society does not compromise culture or tradition as seen here.

These changes were shared by 18 community members (six men and eleven women) of Dansalan participating in a participatory assessment of the impact of the gender profiling. The outcomes of this and all other aspects of the gender profiling have been recorded in the documentation of the impact of assessment of the PRA and in the report written by the volunteer on the gender profiling, "Women in Conflicts: Gender Dynamics in Maranao Communities, Southern Philippines".

The staff at Maradeca continue to believe that the most significant change is the trust of a foreigner by the communities as described above in the Final Report Part 1:3. If there were no trust then the

communities would not share their experiences with the openness that they did. My colleagues within Maradeca felt that my characteristic chatter, laughter and willingness to sit with the community contributed to the trust building, as well as transparency in talking and explaining the work of Toscadar and the gender profiling. I think that most people will accept that with transparency and respect, trust across cultural divides is possible. Instead I choose to concentrate on the impact of gender as I think that there is an ongoing lack of belief that addressing gender is important and/or can result in real change in communities in relatively short amounts of time as seen here.

Again, by focusing on one community I do not wish to devalue the contributions of the other communities, or the hard work and steep learning curve that was undertaken by the staff and volunteers of Maradeca who developed considerable knowledge and skills and confidence throughout the year that we worked together.

Programme Office Comments/Explanation

Angie Bamgbose's positive experience in gender and development work in Muslim communities is an excellent model for peace building initiatives that incorporate a strong gender perspective. This story was also carried by the BBC.

2.3 Australia: Learning to Learn Project (Le Cornu et al, 2003)

Title: "What's different?"

To write this story I had a conversation with Angelica about the changes she has experienced since 2001. She was very clear about the differences she has experienced around managing and initiating her own learning and how she feels about this. In writing this story I have not changed what Angelica shared with me as I believe it demonstrates significant change.

My name is Angelica.

Today I am in Year 5 and my school day is very different to how it was in 2001 when I was in year 3.

In 2001 I was given difficult contracts to do with a short time span and I couldn't use other areas of the school for my learning. My contract wasn't often completed because I found it too difficult. I felt very uncomfortable and unhappy and would get into trouble. I cried a lot and felt worried in class. I didn't really want to come to school.

Now I feel very safe, happy and the work, which we are given, is just right for me because I get to plan my learning in a learning plan and I feel I can complete the work in the time I am given. It's still really challenging and I learn a lot and the teacher knows this. An example of this is when I wanted to make an i-movie I found it really challenging but I found out how to do it and it was still fun.

I feel very comfortable and confident with the way my learning is going now. My teacher trusts me to use any area of the school for my learning and I use the class system to go to other areas when I need to.

I have made more friends and I think this is because of the way I am learning. I need to work with different people and I am getting to know other people in the class much better. If I need a quiet place for my learning I go to the Resource Centre.

I value the way my teacher lets us learn because we get to choose where we sit as long as we work on our task. I feel that I am more in control of what I learn. I feel more mature.

I like the way I am trusted to use the phone, computers, photocopier and cameras for my learning plans and I am now an expert with computers, cameras and other technology. In Year 3 I didn't know how to use these and I wasn't allowed to.

I feel excited about coming to school, I love being at school and I don't want to stay at home if I am a bit sick. I feel like I take more responsibility for my own learning.

Comment:

Angelica has experienced two quite different styles of teaching in the past 3 years.

The first a traditional one, familiar to us all, with the work and the environment determined by the teacher.

Angelica now plans and manages her own learning.

Her sense of empowerment is obvious.

South West Learning Circle – Responses to Angelica's Story (14/8/03)

Criteria indicating significant change

Shift in thinking/worldview

- A shift towards the idea that every adult in a school has a duty of care for every child.
- Shift in power/control away from teacher and shift in world-view.
- Learning stems from student's experiences (as opposed to old teacher-imposed topics and themes).
- Teachers need to believe they have responsibility for all students' learning (not just own class).

Whole School Level

- Common understanding of teacher and learner.
- Need for sound philosophy and theory around that (for learners and teachers).
- For sustainability, need change in whole school culture and structures.
- Learning environment that is comfortable and safe but challenging.
- Student initiated learning requires a shared philosophy.
- Management of resources needed, e.g. structural and cultural change to facilitate changed practice.
- Impact on how roles are interpreted, e.g. that of Teacher Librarian.
- Importance of teaming structures in school so people are moved along by each other.
- Talk, discussion, moderation, interaction among teachers to get change happening.
- Self initiated learning can be inclusive of all students if managed well.
- Affective dimension is powerful, e.g. relationships in which there is trust in the positive intent of others, feeling safe and happy, student feeling trusted by teacher.

Teacher Capacities

- Student experienced a change in practice (so people need to have experienced change – has to make a difference to students).
- Student having control of learning and choice.
- Teachers able to identify and communicate about what students can do.
- Balance student initiated learning with explicit teaching in response to students' needs (not laissez faire).
- Self-awareness, critical reflection by teachers needed for growth.
- Changed methodologies.
- Change in student's engagement levels from year 3–5.

Student capacities

- Student aware of own feelings, e.g. feeling empowered.
- Student able to articulate (identify) what is different.
- Students know about the development of thinking skills and learning styles (e.g. how to use scaffolding to advance own learning).

Appendix 3

Sample Story Reporting Format

3.1 DFID-funded Brong-Ahafor District Support Programme

Identifiers

Heading	NEW ASSEMBLY MEMBERS CAUSE A STIR
Who	District Coordinating Director (DCD)
When	22 June 2001
Location	Office of the DCD – Jaman District Assembly
Domain	Operations of DA, its sub-committees and sub-structures

Description – The Story

During an emergency senior staff meeting at his office, the DCD wanted to solicit the reactions of members present on the attitude of some of the newly appointed assembly members who were demanding access to certain documents in his custody. Judging this to be the first time such demands have been made, he was at a loss as to what to do.

According to the DCD, it seems a new breed of assembly members have been appointed to the Jaman District Assembly who want to put undue pressure on assembly staff in the discharge of their duties.

He complained about some of them he described as "gurus" representing an interest group demanding access to certain documents in the District Assembly. The documents they wanted include the District Assembly's Trial Balance from January to May, the handing-over notes of the former DCE and a copy of the recent auditors' draft report.

After a lengthy deliberation, members present agreed that it is within the law for assembly members to demand access to assembly documents at any time provided they are not personal documents. Therefore, there was nothing wrong with their demands except that the final report of the audit exercise should be given to them instead of the draft copy since changes could be effected in the final report.

The DCD accepted this with some misgivings. He thought he should seek clarification from the Regional Coordinating Director since this was a new dimension in the assembly. However, this prompted him to advise all staff members to update their work and correct all anomalies in order not to be taken unawares. It was also agreed that there should be regular monthly meetings for staff to be well informed before all assembly meetings.

Explanation/Interpretation

Demands for certain documents by some new assembly members have been viewed as a challenge to the 'authority' of assembly staff. Hitherto, assembly members virtually 'begged' to have access to documents and services which were sometimes ignored with excuses.

However, the new breed of assembly members who are mostly professionals and experienced in their various fields, could make assembly staff to sit up to put things in the right order.

If things continue like this, the rights of assembly members would be respected. They can therefore make reasonable demands for the development of their communities. Quality discussions would take place at all assembly meetings for the right decisions to be taken. This would bring the needed change in the Jaman District.

Recommendations

All assembly members should be trained in various aspects of their work-roles and responsibilities in planning, community involvement in decision-making, financial administration of the DA, etc., in order to have the confidence to demand services and contribute to the overall development of the district.

Appendix 4

Facilitation Guide for Story Collection

The facilitator writes all the titles of the stories on the whiteboard, grouped by domain. They leave a space next to each story for comments e.g.

Domain	Title	Comments
4	My life is getting better	Strong, written by a beneficiary, but incomplete, story not finished.
4	Feeling empowered	Moving story, beginning middle and end. Attribution to project is questionable. Great story, not sure if it is about the project.
4	Better decisions for the family	Good solid story. Heard many times before. Small change yet crucial. Not sure about the dates mentioned.
4	Now I understand	OK, not enough information to really understand what is going on.

1. *The facilitator invites volunteers to read out all the stories belonging to the first domain of change. After each story ask:*
   - *What is this story really about?*
   - *What is your opinion of the story?*
2. *The facilitator writes any comments next to the title on the white board as above.*
3. *When all the stories have been read out for the first domain, ask people to vote for the story that they find most significant. Voting can be done by a show of hands.*
4. *When the votes have been cast, if there is a range of scores, encourage participants to discuss why they chose the story they chose. Ask questions such as:*
   - *Why did you choose this story above all other stories?*
   - *But some of you chose a different story – can you explain why you didn't choose this story?*
   - *What do you think of the stories in general?*
5. *Next to each story makes notes of the reasons why they were and were not selected.*
6. *Once everyone has heard why certain stories were voted for above others, the facilitator may call a second vote, this time there may be more consensus.*

If there is still no consensus about which story to choose, facilitate a discussion on the options with the group and come to an agreement, for example:

- *Choose two stories to reflect the range of views*
- *Decide that none of the stories adequately represents what is valued*
- *Choose one story but add a caveat explaining that not all people voted for this story because…*

7. *Move onto the next domain.*

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