

Letters to the Editor

Most Significant Change Technique in the Pacific

The Most Significant Change technique (MSC) is a rapidly emerging technique for monitoring change that is both qualitative and indicator free. Involving regular collection and interpretation of stories about change, MSC is a powerful tool for capturing and making sense of program outcomes.

MSC goes beyond merely capturing and documenting beneficiary stories; each story is subject to a process of participatory analysis which involves key people having conversations about what has been achieved by the program (Dart and Davies 2003).

Rick Davies developed the idea of MSC to meet some of the challenges associated with evaluating a complex, participatory, rural development program in Bangladesh (Davies 1996). Shortly after this, Jess Dart based in Australia, refined and adapted the methodology and joined Davies in writing the User Guide (Davies and Dart 2005). Numerous international development organisations and Australian public sector organisations now use MSC. In July 2006, there were over 500 people subscribed to an email group¹ who claimed to be either implementing MSC or considering implementation.

In 2006 I am aware of seven organisations using MSC in the Pacific, and many of these work in areas associated with health improvement. My experience in using MSC in the Pacific has been highly positive; perhaps this is because the Pacific has such a strong oral tradition. However, despite the intrinsic appeal of using this technique in the Pacific, I do not recommend that MSC be used as the sole tool for monitoring and evaluation. Instead it is best used to complement the more conventional and often quantitative systems that are commonly used. While MSC offers strong evidence of outcomes for individual beneficiaries, and lots of opportunities for reflection and learning, it does not provide quantitative evidence for the 'reach' outcomes. Because of this, MSC may not satisfy donors accountability requirements on its own.

MSC appears to address many of the difficulties associated with evaluating participatory projects that have diverse outcomes and multiple stakeholders. It also has intrinsic appeal because it challenges people to think differently about program evaluation.

MSC has seven key steps (Davies, 1996):

1. The selection of domains of change to be monitored
2. The reporting period

3. The participants
4. Phrasing the question
5. The structure of participation
6. Feedback
7. Verification.

Firstly, the people managing the MSC process identify the domains of change they think need to be evaluated. 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.

Stories of significant change are collected from those most directly involved, such as beneficiaries and field staff. The stories are collected with the help of a simple question: 'During the last month, in your opinion, what was the most significant change that took place as a result of the project?' 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.

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The stories are then analysed and filtered up through the levels of management typically found within an organisation or program. Each level of the organisation 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 sends the 'selected' stories up to the next level of the project 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.

At the end of each period, such as a year, a document is produced with all the stories selected at the uppermost organisational level over that period. The stories are accompanied by the reasons the stories were selected. This document contains several chapters with the stories selected from each of the domains of change. It can be forwarded to the project funders who are asked to assess the stories, selecting those that most fully 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. It is in this way that dialogue is held across an organisation.

The selected stories can then be verified by visiting the sites of the described events. The purpose of this is two-fold: 1) to

¹<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MostSignificantChanges>