Most Significant Change:
using stories to assess impact

Brief Introduction

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What is Most Significant Change?

- Monitoring without indicators

- The story approach

- "Dignifying the anecdote"

- Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation

- Focus on 'Differences that make a difference'

- Focus on outcomes and impact

- Gaining recognition and used in many countries

What is Most Significant Change?

- All stakeholders are involved in deciding what kinds of change to record.

- *Stories are used to identify the impact of an intervention.*

- MSC is systematic because the same questions are asked of everyone, to produce stories that are rigorously and regularly collected.

- These stories become the subject of collective analysis, discussion, filtering, verification and documentation.

Why use MSC?

- To develop a deeper understanding of what an initiative is achieving and not achieving, to clarify project aims and inform positive change.

- Good where *complex, contested or emergent changes*.

- Where there is *no baseline*, but you want to explore *impact*

- Participants collaboratively explore and share their *values* and priorities in identifying what counts for significant change ("success").

- Space is created for participants to reflect on and make sense of complex change

Why use MSC?

- Dialogue and *communication processes* within organizations are strengthened

- To move towards *greater understanding* between all participants.

- Useful for gathering *unexpected changes*

- Stories are a familiar way of sharing and communicating

- Does not demand specialist M&E skills

- Can present impact in accessible *compelling* way

- Draws on *local experience and values*

Examples of use of MSC

- Gender inequality and the 'deep structures' behind it (NOVIB and STEPS Bangladesh and other partners) http://www.oxfamnovib.nl/?id=GUID-A811EE16C7014E6BBC9E63A1ECD157D9

- Exploring 'well-being' rather than 'health' and indigenous health practices – ETC Compass (Netherlands)

Examples of use of MSC

- Impact and sustainability of community radio in East Africa (Case study in 'Measuring Change')

- VSO in early 2000's

- 300+ organisations in development and public sector

- http://mande.co.uk/special-issues/most-significant-change-msc/

MSC involves three key stages:

1. Establishing domains (areas) of interest through a participatory process, e.g. "changes in community communication capacity".

2. Setting up a process to collect and review stories of change. Using a simple question like "During the last month, what do **you** think was the most significant change that took place in the lives of people participating in the project?"

- Important to gather the 'why' of what is seen as significant/important and who involved, where..

- Selection of 'most significant' and why, communicated up and down organisational hierarchy – reasons for selection fed back

MSC involves three key stages:

3. *Secondary analysis of stories and monitoring the process*.

- This can enhance understanding of impact, analysis skills, and using findings.

- Validation of stories with external evaluator

- Communication of impact

Concerns?

- Well written stories have more power and influence

- Tendency to report only positive stories

- Process of 'winnowing' stories is not straightforward needs good planning

- Significant change for who? Danger of distilling consensus around donor agendas?

- 'Up and down' discussions with all stakeholders often neglected (VSO experience)

Concerns?

- Feeding back stories vital part of process

- 'triangulation' remains important

- Process takes time

- Not a stand alone technique – meant to complement other approaches

- Perceived legitimacy of approach – relatively widely used by large NGOs

More info on MSC

Davies,R. and Dart,J. (2005). The Most Significant Change 'MSC' Technique: A Guide to Its Use.http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf

Resources and community of practice http://mande.co.uk/special-issues/most-significant-change-msc/