

MSC approach

Monitoring without indicators

An ongoing testing of the MSC approach

The Review Team was seated under a tree in the Tanzanian village on the few comfortable chairs available. In front of us, we had a small group of male and female farmers engaged in onion growing. My organisation supported this group to raise its income. The Review Team began its work:

Q: 'How is it going?'

A: 'Thank you, we are very happy.'

Q: 'What about your activity, and the onions? Do you get more income?'

A: 'Well, yes, maybe. We cultivate more land, but prices are going down and transport is going up. But it works out nice. We are happy with the support.'

Q: 'If you were to prove to us that it works, what will you tell us?'

A: (From a young woman) 'We do not need to tell you anything. You can just use your eyes! Or you can use your ears! We do not have to tell you.'

Q: 'Eyes and ears? What do you mean?'

A: (Young woman) 'Yes, I am sitting here among the men, and I speak. This never happened before, and it is all because of your support.'

The Most Significant Change approach

This article is about a Danish NGO's experiences of introducing a most promising, sensible monitoring system that is especially suited for grasping social processes within the field of development cooperation. Its 'inventor', Dr Rick Davies, first tried the Most Significant Change methodology (MSC) in Bangladesh in 1994¹. Since then, a number of consultants and organisations have tried out the method to varying degrees. One can find reports depicting its use in Australia, Ethiopia, Malawi, the Philippines, Mozambique, and Zambia. VSO is now adopting it as the official impact monitoring system for their volunteer program.

My organisation, MS², is working with a partnership-based program in Africa, Asia and Central America. Like many others, MS and the partners have for years

Peter Sigsgaard



Peter Sigsgaard is Danish and was born in 1942. He holds an MA degree in Cultural Sociology from the University of Copenhagen and has done research in Cyprus (UN peacekeeping forces) and Greenland (homicide and violence). In 1979 he joined the Danish NGO MS. He has had overseas contracts including Program Director in Mozambique and Principal for MS's NGO Support Center in Tanzania. At present, he is Program Coordinator in Denmark, with the task of developing an M&E system that MS and its partners abroad can use.

Email: <psigsgaa@webmail.ms.dk>.

tried to put in place a variety of more traditional monitoring systems in order to satisfy two main needs. We wanted to *document* activities and their effects on the life of people. Without documentation, down- and upward accountability is impossible. Another need is to facilitate *organisational learning* where we can learn from experience, and adjust to new and unexpected situations.

After several years of effort invested, we had to realise that the traditional systems did not serve either of the two purposes very well. We are therefore now trying out the MSC methodology, which is radically different. However, the new approach is well in line with the values guiding the partnership activities. First and foremost, it does not alienate the actors – it is participatory.

With MSC you simply ask people to identify positive or negative changes observed over a period of time within a given *domain* of interest. The same people are asked about which change they find is the most important, and why they have chosen it as *the most significant*.

The outcome of the exercise will be a number of recorded ‘stories’ about change. Some of them, but not all, relate to our objectives – the requirement for documentation is served. Furthermore, we learn from the realities as people see them by systematic, collective reflecting on the ‘stories’ told. Thereby, social meaning is attached to the outcome of our activities – organisational learning takes place.

A prerequisite for insight-based learning is that the results of the exercise are made known and discussed by all stakeholders. Feedback mechanisms are important. In the MSC, this is done by assessments of the data by influential groups at different levels in the organisation. Their choices of ‘the ultra-most significant’, together with the

reasons for selecting them, are communicated to all actors in the system.

In MS, the influential groups are board members at different levels. A given country program has a Policy Advisory Board (PAB) where partners and independent

nationals are in majority. In Denmark, a board representing the members governs MS. In the guidelines published here for MS’ country offices, Steps 7 and 10 specify how the assessments of stories are done in the MS hierarchy. The guidelines

also describe more generally how we are now conducting the exercise in general.

To improve understanding, it is also mandatory that some of the more dramatic or surprising

With MSC you simply ask people to identify positive or negative changes observed over a period of time within a given *domain* of interest. The same people are asked about which change they find is the most important, and why they have chosen it as *the most significant*. The outcome of the exercise will be a number of recorded ‘stories’ about change.

‘stories’ be *verified* by supplementary investigation. By doing this, the subjective perceptions of informants can be detailed and one can map out the (social) processes leading to a given change.

The method uses open-ended questions, and one asks for stories rather than condensed quantitative measures. Therefore, it often grasps the unforeseen consequences of what the development organisations have set in motion. In the example at the beginning of this article, the Review Team is clearly looking for measures satisfying their indicator (money), mirroring the objective of income generation. The team came to appreciate 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 intervention³.

Why this breakaway from orthodoxy?

The major reason for trying out an alternative was the painful realisation that the modified logical framework system then in use simply did not work. Partners and all other persons at all levels in MS demonstrated clearly that they had problems in defining objectives in an operational manner. It was even more pathetic to witness how all of us – including our hired consultants – tried to construct ambitious, non-measurable, quantitatively formulated indicators that were never used. As a result, reports with the expected data were not forthcoming.

This paucity of usable documentation and knowledge gained was clearly visible on a background of everybody being extremely busy with collection of all kinds of fragmented data. They were rarely used in descriptions of effects or impact. This may be the reason why the data were only occasionally analysed or stored for future use.

We also realised that we were sharing this misery with nearly all other organisations, including the big, official donor agencies. Everybody seemed to invest a lot in following the ritual, very few could present gains from it.

MS was attracted to test the MSC approach because:

- It contributed towards saving considerable time and energy. The orthodox system forces us to invent and agree on sophisticated, pre-constructed, quantitative indicators. After that

we fight to the bitter end to feed these indicators into a system which clearly lacks resources for measuring against them.

- It is involving and participatory at all levels. It is in accordance with the ideas behind our partnership approach.
- It is honestly transparent and free from pseudo-objectivity.
- It demystifies monitoring and makes it understandable to all of us. The method reflects a strong epic tradition that marks many non-western cultures.
- It is suited to use information that is already there, coming up in Partnership Review Workshops.
- It demands that information is used at all levels with clear links between monitoring at partner/ 'beneficiary' level, and monitoring of country programs and the whole of MsiS.
- It serves as a worthwhile supplement to the M&E systems already in place⁴.

Pilot studies

The MS programs in Zambia and Mozambique were chosen as testing grounds, not least because they were conducted in different cultural and historical settings – differences being conspicuous concerning language and the way the partnership approach was implemented.

Ten partner organisations in each country were visited. During the test we tried out a number of different interviewing methods and constantly elaborated and refined the wording of questions and the explanations given for the 'domains of interest'.

The latter especially was a heavy task. The method demands that much time is invested in precise formulations, and that the

interviewer is also familiar with the concepts and ideas used.

In Zambia 'interviews' were often conducted in relatively large groups (15–40 persons). The results of the group interviews were promising and the method often led to dramatic new knowledge and insight. However, the method is costly. Working with big groups demands a skilful facilitator⁵ and this cannot be applied on a large scale in the MS system.

In Mozambique, we used an approach closer to the system that we have now decided to use in the current experimentation (one or two informants are chosen by the partner-representative, who also conducts the interview).

The *overall result* was that the method worked. It provided us with added insight, especially about the importance connected to the observed changes. It also sometimes pointed to new dimensions. Very little of the information related to us could be found in already existing reports and files at the MS offices.

Participants also benefited, especially from the group sessions. 'We have never talked about our work like that', a director of a small NGO exclaimed after a staff session. Many partners expressed surprise about how easily the methodology led to important discussions and reflection among staff about their role and the wider setting they were operating in. Many organisations decided to continue using the approach as an internal monitoring tool.

Some of the more specific findings of the pilot study are:

- All respondents easily identified changes – but nearly no one communicated them as stories. According to the methodology, we asked for stories rather than short, generalized statements. Behind this may have been a slightly stereotyped perception of African people as especially adept in storytelling (epic culture). It may well be that objective-oriented planning and what I call *Logframe-terrorism* have influenced the minds of many of our respondents. In one small CBO the staff expressed it in this way: *We first want to identify outcomes based on our input – then afterwards we will invent a story for you.*
- Some 'domains' are more easily grasped than others. When using the method, the interviewer is forced to explain and use locally understood concepts rather than the exact wording in the questionnaire. For example, it was difficult to explain the domain of Intercultural Cooperation. In Mozambique it often did not ring any bell. This was a bit surprising since MS runs a personnel program positioning Danes with the partner. One declared aim is to stimulate cooperation across cultural borders. However, the Danes were rarely perceived as agents of intercultural dialogue, but more seen as professional assistants⁶. The experience brought out the power of the MSC approach as an organisational learning tool. MS got a good opportunity to raise awareness of its fundamental aim by asking and elaborating on questions about Intercultural Cooperation. We expect that over time, the method will contribute to shaping the perception of this dimension of the development work. We have therefore decided to retain the questions even though they are difficult to grasp at present.
- It follows from the above, that the method benefits from being facilitated by an interviewer – written responses to mailed questionnaires will not work. Some training of the interviewer in non-directive techniques and also probing is necessary in order to avoid, for instance, using

The method demands that much time is invested in precise formulations, and that the interviewer is also familiar with the concepts and ideas used.

examples in a way that influences the informants' answers.

- Asking very open questions provided us with rich information on political and societal *context*. Some had feared that the questions were too broad to elicit specific information about partnership activities and their outcome. Luckily for MS, a big part of the changes observed related to some of the supported activities, but very often seen in a wider perspective than that of the input-activity-outcome project picture.
- In the partner organisations there was an understandable tendency to talk automatically about changes closely related to the organisations' interventions and aims. We therefore stated clearly in the beginning of the interview that we are interested in the changes in the lives of people in the community. We further explained that we would ask questions about the organisation's performance at the end of the interview.
- 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 are to report to officials or other like persons.
- Field workers (extension officers) from partner organisations proved to be excellent informants. So-called 'beneficiaries' directly involved in the activities also gave very relevant answers. Officials working at office level and in superior positions tended to give more unspecific and hazy answers.
- It was extremely easy for the PAB members to choose the stories that they found significant from a country program angle.
- Verification of stories was not done in the pilot study. However, many of the stories had a character that immediately asked for further investigation⁷. The curiosity of MS' 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.

Where will the process take us?

The pilot exercise was so promising that MS decided to continue experimentation on a larger scale, as evidenced by the guidelines for the country offices. By the end of 2002 we will know how far our expectations have been met. Several programs already now use the group-based interview in annual review workshops with partner organisations. It is reported that this approach gives 'beneficiaries' a much needed opportunity to raise their voices.

It is my guess that the method will be adopted, and used as a monitoring system by MS. There are also indications that the work with this simple approach has demystified monitoring in general.

... I believe that the use of and respect for peoples' own indicators will lead to participatory methodologies and 'measurement' based on *negotiated indicators* where all stakeholders have a say in the actual planning of the development process⁸.

The process of verification, and the curiosity aroused by the powerful data collected, will stimulate the country offices as well as the partners to supplement their knowledge through use of other, maybe more refined and controlled measures.

The MSC system is only partially participatory. Domains of interest are centrally decided on, and the sorting of stories according to significance is hierarchic. However, I believe that the use of and respect for peoples' own indicators will lead to participatory methodologies and 'measurement' based on *negotiated indicators* where all stakeholders have a say in the actual planning of the development process⁸.

Some people in the MS system have voiced a concern that the MSC method is too simple and 'loose' to be accepted by our source donor, Danida, and our staff in the field. The method is not scientific enough, they say.

My computer's Thesaurus program tells me that science means knowledge. I surely can recommend the Most Significant Change method as scientific.

Guidelines for MS' country offices (COs)

As an example on how our ongoing experimentation is done, these guidelines are published here in a slightly modified form. All MS offices in Eastern and Southern Africa now use these guidelines.

1 Step 1: The CO assigns task to one person

Before starting, the CO should assign the responsibility for coordinating the work to one person.

2 Step 2: Find interviewer(s)

The partner and MS identify a person from the partner organisation who will conduct interviews and fill out the forms to be delivered. The task is described under step 5. We propose that the Danish Development Worker (DW) be also involved if the partner has a DW assigned.

It may be useful to arrange for a brief, separate meeting with interviewers, where questions about why and how can be answered. It is especially important for participants to reach a common understanding of how the 'domains' mentioned under step 3, are to be understood.

Ideally, a small 'training session', trying out the interview on some informants, should be held.

3 Step 3: Questionnaires and domains

An identification sheet and three forms (questionnaires) are enclosed (not published here)⁹. They are forwarded in Word format to the COs and can be distributed electronically and on paper from there.

Three domains of interest have been outlined, and each form is about one domain. The domains are chosen because they are central to MS' overall policy as described in our strategy paper *Solidarity through partnership*. The domains are about observed changes in:

- Poverty Reduction;
- Intercultural Cooperation; and
- Organisational Performance.

The pilot tests showed that Intercultural Cooperation is a bit difficult to explain to those answering the question. We have decided to retain it, not least because we thereby direct attention to this element of the MS program.

You will probably find that not all interviewers understand these domains in exactly the same way. This is not a major

obstacle; as we can always later adjust and influence the common understanding of the concepts. The important thing is to get started.

Following the questionnaires is a form (not published here) identifying the organisation and the informants (the ones interviewed).

4 Step 4: Partner identifies 1-2 informant(s)

The interviewer/DW identifies one or two persons to interview (informants). They should be from the area where the partner organisation works, and they should have some idea about what the partner is doing.

The informants could be anybody, employees in partner organisation, 'beneficiaries', key persons in the community, the shopkeeper around the corner. The important thing is that we believe that the chosen man or woman is in a position to perceive changes for good or for worse. Remember to write down a characterisation of the informant(s) on the front-page form.

Experience has shown that extension workers (field staff) connected to the partner activities are very good witnesses or informants.

5 Step 5: Conducting the interview

Arrange a meeting with the informant(s) and explain the purpose of the exercise: We want to have a feeling for the environment in which MS and the partner operates: that is, we would like to record what has changed in other peoples' lives – for better or worse.

Then you read aloud the first question. You may need to explain certain parts of the question. When you do this, please try not to influence the informant's choice of example. Do not explain by giving examples of possible answers.

Be also careful to underscore that Poverty Reduction contains many dimensions:

Do not say: Poverty is about livelihood or economic well-being.

Rather explain in everyday language that poverty is about many things. It is about peoples' ability to control their own life. This can be through having sufficient resources like money, access to productive resources like land, access to knowledge and education, and possibilities of participating in local political decision-making, etc.

Interview as a non-directive dialogue

The interview is not a classroom examination. Try to make it as relaxed as possible and give it a character of a dialogue. If you have two informants, then let them discuss and agree to one joint statement.

Be careful to stress that we are after perceptions of changes in other peoples' lives in general, not the personal experience of the informant. And try to get the stories as specific as possible. You often have to probe and ask for examples:

Informant: 'There are signs of more harmony within families.'

Interviewer: 'Signs? What do you mean by signs, which signs?'

Informant: 'Now many wives discuss family budgets with their husbands, and they can even dispose of money that the husband has earned. This is because of the work done by the Women's Group in this community.'

The above example can be extended with the interviewer asking: 'How many is "many wives"?'

The informant will often answer by mentioning activities and all the nice things that the organisation has done. Here you also have to probe:

Informant: 'It is a change that XX has conducted training for members of the community.'

Interviewer: 'Yes, I understand that there has been some training, but what has changed in peoples' lives because of that?'

Sometimes, there will be discussion about what counts as a change. A change can be big or small, positive or negative, and could affect a single individual, a small group, or an entire organisation: the point is that it is seen as a long-term, sustainable change rather than a one-off thing. In a few cases, a 'change' may be something that stays the same; for example something continues which would most likely have stopped otherwise.

Does the change have to be about work objectives of the partner? No. We anticipate that many change stories would be directly connected with the work of the partner; however, if the most significant change is to do with other things that have happened, for example, in the local community, that is fine.

If the informant says that there has been no change whatsoever, you may respond that this simply cannot be

true. There are always changes, they may be small, but nothing is like it was a few minutes ago – then ask for the most significant change among the tiny ones.

In a few cases a delicate situation may occur. If the informant is employed by the partner organisation, he or she may be hesitant to talk about negative changes under the heading 'Organisational Performance'. Whether this happens depends very much of general leadership style and 'climate' in the organisation. If you sense such hesitation, you can skip the question, but please write a note about it in the form.

When a change 'story' has been formulated, you may need to ask the informant to summarise the central content in a few sentences. In the pilot test, we often used this question to elicit a summary:

Interviewer: If you were to tell this story to a journalist from CNN and wanted it to make headlines, what would you say?

Recording the story

Write down what the informant concluded as a *short* and *verbatim* statement formulated as if the informant(s) were telling it to us directly in the first person.

Do not write: 'Mrs X said that freedom of expression had improved significantly during the last year.'

Rather write: 'Today we can publicly criticise our government and chiefs when they do not deliver fertiliser in time or give it to their political friends. This was not possible one year ago, at that time we feared prison.'

By writing the statements down verbatim, you add life and meaning to what people tell you, and it makes interesting reading later on.

The completed forms are forwarded to the CO instead of a quarterly progress report. Keep a copy for your own discussions in the partner organisation.

Step 6:

What is happening at the CO?

Hundreds of statements about significant changes are produced within the MS system by this method. It is, however, simple to process them and learn something from them.

At the country office, the forms are read and checked. Sometimes the answers show that the questions have been misunderstood or that the interviewer did not probe enough –

guidelines

the answers are too vague and general. This may encourage the CO to take up the issue with the partner in order to get clearer and more specific information when the exercise is conducted next time.

The different stories are fed into a simple Access database. This can be copied (electronically or on paper) to anyone who is interested. However, we intend later on to construct a simple database accessible on the Internet, where information from all countries and over time can be retrieved.

It is foreseen that at least the program staff at the CO will have a meeting to go through all the listed answers received. The meeting will have two tasks:

- One is to select one 'story' within each domain, which the CO finds is the most significant as reflecting issues *pertaining to the MS country program as an entity*. The CO staff must also to agree on *why* they find this story in particular important. The outcome of the meeting is written down for later communication to the partners and to MS in Denmark.
- The other task is to select one or two interesting cases, where there is a need to explore in more detail what has happened. A reported positive or negative change may be dramatic, but it is not clear whether it has in fact occurred, and if so, *how* it was brought about. The idea is that the program officer can go to the field and together with the partner explore the social processes and forces behind a given change. By doing this, we learn from experience.

Step 7: PAB prioritises and gives reasons

The list of stories is presented to the Policy Advisory Board (PAB), which also has the task of deciding on one 'story' within each domain as the most significant as reflecting *the MS country program as an entity*. The PAB also justifies its choice.

Step 8: Description of outcome and feedback

This part of the process is extremely important. It is through this, that organisational learning takes place. The experience is that this step is often forgotten or so much delayed that it is of very little value. *Please, give the following a high priority!*

The CO summarises in a short article what came in and what was learned from this information. In addition, the stories selected by PAB (and the reasons given for choosing them)

are recorded verbatim in the same article. The article is published in the MS newsletter, thereby giving feedback to partners and DWs in the country.

In this way, the actors in the country program get additional, very specific information on what PAB finds is relevant on the MS political agenda here and now.

Step 9: Forward material to Denmark

All material is to be forwarded electronically to MS Denmark, where all stories will be fed into a special database suitable for qualitative analysis of text¹⁰. They will probably also be accessible on the Internet.

Step 10: What happens in Denmark?

Ideally, the MS Board and the PAB Chairpersons should also analyse and choose significant changes in the same way as PAB (step 7). They should choose between all stories selected by all PABs, and they should select the ones that reflect the situation here and now *for the global MS program*. The outcome should be communicated to all actors in the system, for example in the Annual Report on MS' program in the South.

It has not yet been decided whether we here will conduct this last part of the exercise. One reason is that the test does not include Central America and Asia. Another is that the program for the Annual Policy Meeting has not yet been made.

The material will, however, be used for monitoring purposes and analysis – and we also expect that it will furnish the MSIS program with a rich material that can be used for information and documentation.

Finally, the material and the experiences by the partners and the COs will be a basis for a decision on whether to continue with this form of monitoring. If the result is positive, it is foreseen that the MSC exercise will be used with story collection at least once in a year, thereby documenting some of the important changes that are happening.

guidelines

Notes

- 1 Davies, R, *An evolutionary approach to facilitating organisational learning: an experiment by the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh*, www.swan.ac.uk/cds/trd/ccdb.htm.
Rick Davies has been extremely helpful in giving advice and he has greatly inspired our current attempt to use the methodology in practice. Likewise, we have drawn on the experiences by Jessica Dart, who has used the approach extensively in Australia. I also owe thanks to Jo Rowlands (VSO, UK) and Ros David (Action Aid UK) for their preparedness to share their experiences with me before we embarked on our own experimentation.
- 2 MS is an NGO, its name is an abbreviation of the Danish 'Mellempfolkeligt Samvirke', see <www.ms.dk>. Responsibility of all views set out in this article rests with the author even though MS fully endorses the endeavour to introduce MSC as a general monitoring system.
- 3 The 'donor' organisation (MS) had actually used gender training as an entry point to the partnerships with groups in the area. The case also illustrates why it is not exactly to the point to label MSC an 'Indicator-free Monitoring System'. It would be more correct to talk about a method devoid of predefined indicators, as it allows for people themselves to invent them.
- 4 The Most Significant Change method is a tool for continuous *monitoring*. It is not suited for evaluations, which normally are closely referring to original objectives and made after activities have been finished. On the other hand, data collected and insight gained through MSC can feed well into an evaluation. Monitoring and Evaluation are not two completely distinct processes, see the article by Marc de Boer in *Evaluation Journal of Australasia*, vol. 1, no. 2, December 2001, pp. 8–13.
- 5 We used the MS program officers. I am very grateful for the dedicated assistance rendered by Charlton Sulwe, MS Zambia, and Roberto Armando, MS Mozambique.
- 6 MS Mozambique name the Danes 'Tecnicos Cooperantes' today. This further stresses the professional aspects. Ironically, when the program started in 1982, they were labelled 'Internationalistas' or 'Solidarity Workers', thereby stressing the function of linking Mozambique to other parts of the world.
- 7 An example: a small NGO in Zambia claimed to have reduced malnutrition among small children in their area by more than 10%. This is dramatic as malnutrition is going up at the national level. A sad outcome of a possible verification may be that the conclusion is based on bad statistics. The organisation obtained its figures from under-five clinics. A guess is that mothers with malnourished children are not using the clinics as often as before (User fee? Afraid of being stigmatized?).
- 8 See Estrella, M et al. (eds), *Learning from change: issues and experiences in participatory monitoring and evaluation*, Intermediate Technical Publications, London, 2000.
- 9 As an example, the question on Poverty Reduction is cited here:
'Thinking back through the last year, what do you think has been the **most** significant change in the lives of people that you work with? Give at least **two examples** that illustrate the change.
(Please note that the change does not necessarily have to do with any action taken by your organisation or MS. The question is about change in general among the people of the community or people that you work with).'
- 10 QSR N5 NUD•IST.