
MSC Guide:

Based on the Experience of ADRA Laos

*A guide to implementing the Most Significant Changes (MSC)
monitoring system in ADRA country offices*

Developed by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA)
in Laos with support from ADRA Australia

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The Purpose of the MSC Guide

The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in Laos piloted the Most Significant Changes (MSC) monitoring system from November 2003 – May 2004. The pilot project was funded by ADRA Australia under its Innovative Grants Program. One of the major goals of the project was to share ADRA Laos' experience with MSC with other ADRA country offices. This guide has been developed specifically to assist other ADRA country offices – as well as other NGOs – to design effective MSC monitoring systems. The guide follows a step-by-step process for implementing the MSC monitoring system, using the experience of ADRA Laos as a case study. Since it is based on the pilot project of ADRA Laos, this guide does not encompass the experience of other organizations with the method. There are other very helpful resources available on MSC based on a diverse range of applications. Please refer to the additional resources section at the end of the guide.

Introduction to MSC

Most Significant Changes is an innovative method of monitoring that encourages participation from stakeholders. As a qualitative monitoring system, MSC collects stories of change that occur at the village level in the lives of beneficiaries. These changes are systematically reviewed by stakeholders of the organization, with each group selecting the most significant change to pass to the next level.

Unlike conventional monitoring systems that use pre-defined indicators, MSC often reveals unexpected outcomes of the project. The system uses 'domains,' or broad categories of change, in place of indicators. Another way MSC differs from other monitoring systems is that it places a strong emphasis on the experience and opinions of beneficiaries.

The method promotes organizational learning by not only collecting qualitative data, but by analyzing it as well. Based on the learning that takes place from changes reported, an organization can move towards positive changes and away from negative changes.

Because of its participatory nature, MSC monitoring creates an 'on-going conversation between stakeholders.' The discussion during the selection process to choose the most significant change promotes dialogue throughout the organization about changes reported. In MSC monitoring, this discussion is perhaps the most valuable part of the process.

MSC is designed to complement other monitoring techniques. It should not be used as a substitute for quantitative monitoring, but should be used to enhance other methods of monitoring and provide a more meaningful picture of project outcomes.

The Most Significant Changes methodology was developed by Rick Davies in Bangladesh in 1994. The method has been used by other non-governmental organizations in many countries around the world.

Step 1: Starting

Getting started is probably one of the most challenging steps in the process. In order to begin using MSC, it often takes a specific person or a small group of people within an organization who are motivated to implement the monitoring system. Because introducing the MSC monitoring system requires an investment of time, it's important that there is at least one person with sufficient amount of time to take responsibility for the MSC system.

However, several individuals alone cannot implement an effective MSC monitoring system. Organizational commitment is essential for its success. Buy-in from other members of the organization is important to acquire **before** beginning. Support from members of top management is crucial, as they will influence whether MSC will be able to impact the organization in a positive way. Interest from donors is another point to consider, since ideally they will also participate in MSC.

Initially, it's helpful to start using MSC on a small scale. A small pilot project is an excellent way to get started. Each country office must adapt MSC to meet its specific situation and needs. During the pilot project, many of the areas where MSC needs to be modified will surface. These revisions can be made after the pilot project before the system is used on a larger scale.

ADRA Laos. In the case of ADRA Laos, the associate director was very interested in MSC monitoring. He approached ADRA Australia as a possible donor for a pilot project. As ADRA Australia was interested in improving monitoring and evaluation systems and increasing the organization's ability to learn, they funded the project. During the pilot, an intern was responsible for coordinating the project, with support from the associate director. Others in the top management in ADRA Laos were very supportive of piloting MSC, and this helped to ensure its success.

Although ADRA Laos received funding for a pilot project, other organizations may be able to pilot MSC without direct funding. Costs associated with MSC may be covered by projects in line items such as monitoring. However, it will be difficult to conduct a pilot if there is not a specific person responsible for the MSC system and this cost must be considered.

Before beginning the pilot project, ADRA Laos identified four goals for using MSC: 1) to increase the participation of stakeholders in the monitoring process, 2) to develop the analytical skills of field staff, 3) to improve ADRA Laos' ability to determine overall impact of projects, and 4) to improve ADRA Laos' understanding of how projects are interacting with beneficiaries. These goals helped staff members to understand the purpose of using MSC.

For the pilot project, ADRA Laos involved two ADRA Australia-funded projects both focused on water supply and sanitation. The first project, ACTION Health, in Attapeu

Province provided safe water and health education. The second project funded by ADRA Australia, LWP in Luangnamtha Province, provided safe water and latrines. Another project funded by ADRA Canada, REACH project, complemented the activities of LWP by providing health education. LWP and REACH were considered as one project for the purpose of the MSC monitoring system.

Step 2: Establishing Domains of Change

Domains of change are used in MSC to categorize changes reported through the monitoring system. They serve as general categories so that stories of change can be compared as a group. Some organizations have used MSC without domains of change. However, domains of change can be helpful if an organization would like to look at certain areas of change within a project. It can also make the selection process easier.

There are several ways to choose domains. They can be chosen by a few individuals before the MSC monitoring system begins. Otherwise, a participatory process involving many stakeholders can be used to select domains of change when MSC is being introduced. Often an open domain is chosen so that the monitoring system can respond to unexpected changes, which is a fundamental concept in MSC. Including a domain for negative changes/areas to improve is a method to ensure field staff report them and are able to improve project implementation based on the negative changes. From the experience of many other organizations with MSC, unless a domain is specified for areas to improve/negative changes, they are rarely reported.

Each organization should decide how many domains of change they want to use. Four domains are considered to be the maximum for MSC. More than four can become difficult to manage. One way of simplifying MSC is to begin with two domains: positive changes and areas to improve/negative changes.

ADRA Laos. Before ADRA Laos introduced MSC to field staff members, a possible set of domains were identified. These domains were presented during the workshop to provide initial training for MSC, and staff were given the opportunity to suggest different ones. However, they were strongly in favor of keeping the domains suggested. The idea of ‘domains of change’ was very new to them. In ADRA Laos, we changed from talking about ‘domains’, to referring to ‘groups’, as this was much easier for our field staff to understand.

The four domains of change - or groups - used in ADRA Laos’ pilot project were:

- Changes in people’s health
- Changes in people’s behavior
- Changes that reflect an area to improve (negative)
- Changes in any other area (open)

During the pilot project, 25% of the stories collected were in the domain for changes in people’s health, 33% were in the domain for changes in people’s behavior, 17% were in the areas to improve/negative domain, and 25% of the stories were in the open domain. Project staff found that it was much easier to collect stories about changes in behavior compared to

changes in health. Although there was some confusion among field staff about these two domains, it provided an opportunity for staff to think critically about the difference between changes in health and changes in behavior. Initially, stories were put into domains during meetings of the project management committee (PMC) to select stories, with the entire group participating in the process. However, to make the meetings more efficient, field staff members began categorizing the stories they wrote into domains before the meeting.

Step 3: Determining the Reporting Period

The cycle of reporting stories of significant change, selecting changes, and giving feedback should follow a regular reporting period. In his original pilot with MSC, Rick Davies used a monthly reporting period because the system was designed to respond to **recent** changes. Stories of change ideally would be reported in the same month in which they occurred. However, some organizations have found that a monthly reporting period is too demanding. Some have used a quarterly reporting period, and others have used an even longer reporting period. For example, one organization used a two-year reporting period for volunteers to report the most significant change that occurred during their volunteer service of two years.

Some issues to consider when determining the reporting period include: 1) How much time will be required for implementing MSC, 2) Whether or not translation is required, since this will slow down the reporting period, 3) Scheduling of field activities, 4) How much time will be required for follow-up of negative changes, and 5) How often is it feasible to hold MSC meetings, considering the travel schedules of field staff and management staff?

ADRA Laos. Because ADRA Laos had a specific amount of time to pilot MSC, it was decided that a monthly reporting period should be used. It was assumed from the beginning that the reporting period might be too frequent to maintain over a long period of time. However, a quarterly reporting period would have allowed very little time for follow-up monitoring and training for field staff during the pilot project. With stories being reported each month, areas where project staff did not understand clearly could be recognized quickly. Although the reporting period made the pilot project intense, project staff were able to learn the system in a relatively short period of time. One of the biggest challenges to keeping up with the monthly reporting period was translation of the selected stories from Lao into English. Another problem ADRA Laos encountered was that it was difficult to follow-up on negative changes reported on a regular basis since the reporting period was only a month.

As mentioned earlier, MSC as it was first conceived was meant to respond to changes that occurred within the last month. In practice, ADRA Laos field staff found it very difficult to find stories that happened in this time frame. Many of the stories were about changes that had occurred several months – or even a year - earlier. Although it was emphasized that staff should strive to find recent changes, we accepted changes that had not occurred within the past month. There are definitely benefits to collecting changes that occurred within the last month. In other projects, it may be much easier to collect recent stories, especially if the project has recently begun. However, in the experience of ADRA Laos it was not practical to make this a requirement.

Step 4: Collecting Stories of Change

To begin collecting stories of significant change, the first thing to decide is who will be telling the stories. Will beneficiaries be reporting the changes? Will field staff tell stories about changes that they observe? Are there perhaps other partners such as government staff who will be telling stories about change? There are many different options, although typically in MSC it is beneficiaries who tell the stories of change.

It is also important to consider who will be collecting or writing the stories of change. There are a variety of possibilities, according to what your organization is aiming to achieve by using MSC. Some organizations choose to ask beneficiaries to write stories of change. For example, in a project providing literacy classes, beneficiaries can learn to write stories. Others choose to ask local field staff to write stories of change based on either discussions with beneficiaries or their own observations. Yet another possibility is to have management staff write stories of change from their trips to the field. You may decide to allow all of these groups of people to write stories of change. In this case, you would need to consider whether or not the domains would need to be designed according to who wrote the stories.

MSC is based on a fundamental question: “During the last month, what is the most significant change that has occurred in the lives of people participating in ADRA’s project?” To include a domain for area to improve/negative changes, the following question can be used: “During the last month, have you noticed any negative changes in the lives of people participating in ADRA’s project that reflect an area where the project needs to improve?” Depending on the situation where you are working, these questions may need to be simplified. The idea behind the questions is much more important than the wording of the question itself. It is crucial that those collecting stories of change understand the main idea of the questions guiding MSC. The questions will need to be translated for beneficiaries in a way they can understand.

Another important issue to consider is how the significant changes will be collected. Your organization can use the approach of focus groups in villages, or do individual interviews with beneficiaries. If one of these methods is selected, you will need to decide how you will choose informants (i.e. participants in focus groups, interviewees, etc.) Another option for collecting changes is through observation. Regardless of the method you choose, it is important that each story clearly indicates how the change was collected.

You must also decide how stories of change will be recorded. Some organizations choose to use a very open system for reporting stories of change, with no specific requirements for stories. Others use a form with specific questions to be answered. Your choice will depend heavily on the experience of your field staff (or whoever will collect changes) in writing stories. Regardless of how you choose to record them, the basic requirements for stories are that they must include a change and a reason why the change is important.

ADRA Laos. In the case of ADRA Laos, we decided that two groups of people should tell stories of change: beneficiaries and field staff. Beneficiaries would tell stories of change that were happening in their lives, and field staff would tell stories based on their observation. It

is interesting to note that in the pilot project, all of the stories chosen in the final selection by the donor, ADRA Australia, were stories reported by beneficiaries.

Field staff were responsible for collecting and writing stories of change. They collected stories through interviews with villagers and by their own observation. In the original design of MSC, we had planned for field staff to conduct focus groups to gather the stories of change from beneficiaries. However, since our field staff felt strongly that individual interviews would be more effective, we adopted this method. The two sources of changes were effective because we heard changes from beneficiaries that our field staff were unaware of, and we also heard changes observed by our field staff that beneficiaries may not have reported.

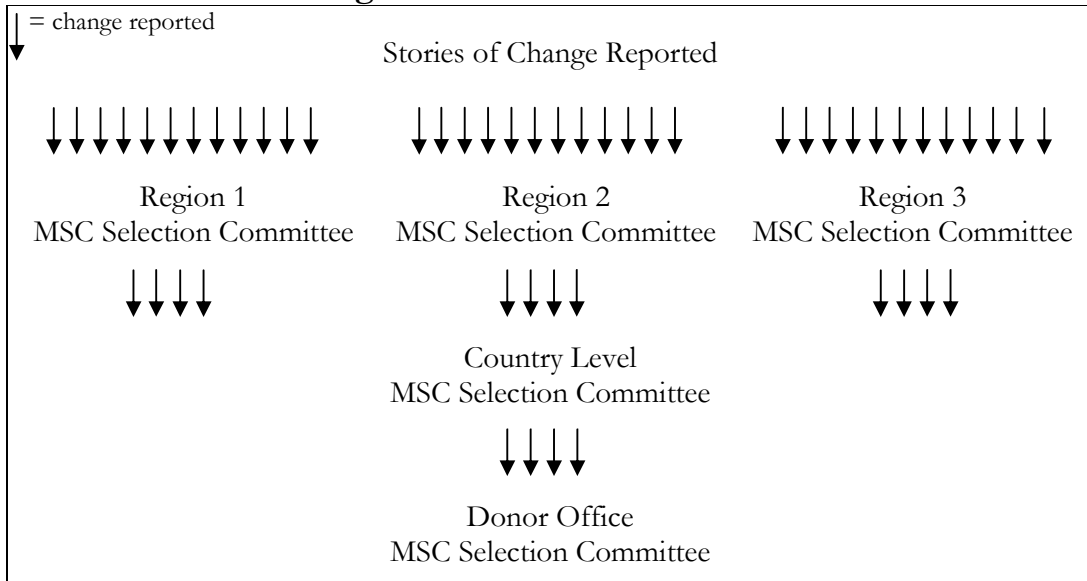
The fundamental questions of MSC were adapted, since field staff had difficulty understanding the original way the questions were posed. Relatively complex words used in the questions, such as ‘significantly,’ ‘participating,’ and ‘occurred’ were difficult for ADRA Laos national staff to understand. The first question was revised to: “What is the best change that has happened in the villages?” This question was designed to gather answers for the three domains: changes in health, changes in behavior, and changes in any other area (open). The second question was adapted to: “What is the biggest problem because of ADRA’s project?” This question was meant to gather stories for the fourth domain: changes that reflect an area to improve (negative). One of the shortcomings of the revised questions is that they neglected to include the specific time period of one month. Including the time period in the questions would have further motivated field staff and beneficiaries to report recent changes.

We found it very helpful to develop a specific form to report stories of change. The form covered the basic journalistic questions of what, who, where, why, and how. This was trialed in the field before beginning MSC and revised with field staff during the initial training session for MSC. Appendixes 1-4 are stories in each domain that were selected by all stakeholders. These provide an example of the form for stories of change used by ADRA Laos.

Step 5: Selecting Stories of Change

Next, you must decide on a process for reviewing the stories of change and selecting the most significant ones. The actual selection process varies according to the structure of each organization. Usually, multiple levels in the organization are involved in the selection process. For example, if a project is implemented in several regions of the country, the first selection process could take place at the regional level. At the next level, the main office would review changes from regional offices and go through a selection process. The main office would then send most significant changes selected over six months to one year to the donor. The donor is meant to complete the final phase of the selection process. At each level, the reason for selection must be identified. This is one of the most important concepts behind the MSC monitoring system, because it documents the opinions of various stakeholders and promotes dialogue about significant changes.

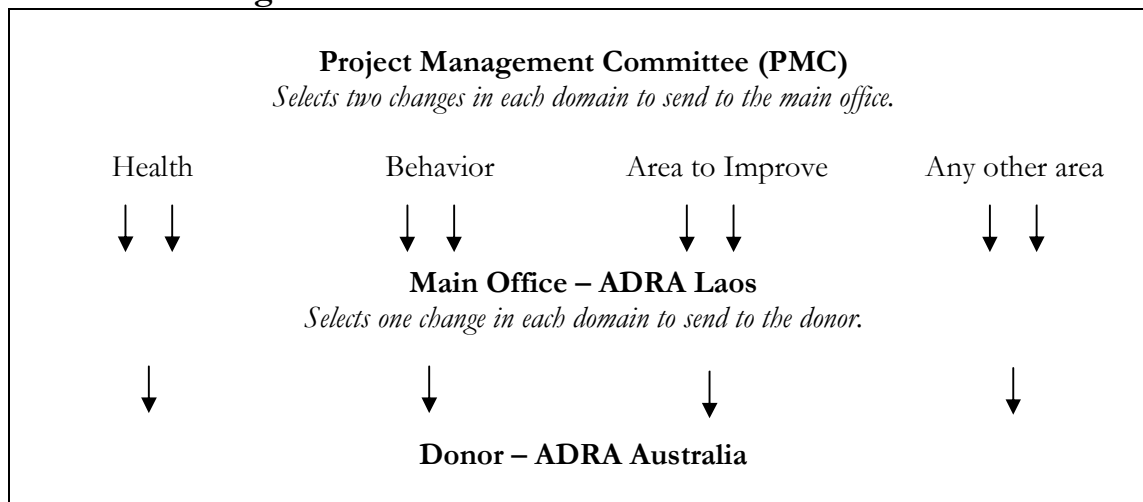
Diagram of MSC Selection Process



Committees should be set up at the various levels to select changes. Existing structures, such as project management committees or administrative committees, may also be used. During the selection process, most organizations who have used MSC have recommended reading the MSC stories out loud during committee meetings. Another issue to consider is how committee members will actually select the most significant change in each domain: will they use anonymous voting or come to a consensus through discussion? Although the process for selecting stories is flexible, it must be transparent. Committees may also consider setting criteria for selection of stories, although this is best done after the stories have been read and discussed. If staff members writing stories are also part of the committee selecting the stories, it is important to be careful of bias.

ADRA Laos. The projects participating in ADRA Laos’ MSC pilot project were implemented in one region, or province, of the country. ADRA Laos modified the selection process for MSC to function within this context. The first selection process took place at the project level with an existing PMC. Since there was only one PMC to submit changes to the main office, they had to select two changes in each domain - instead of only one - so that the main office could also select. The PMC selected one change reported by beneficiaries and one change observed by field staff in each domain. At the main office, one story from each domain was selected. The third selection process took place at the donor level.

Diagram of MSC Selection Process in ADRA Laos



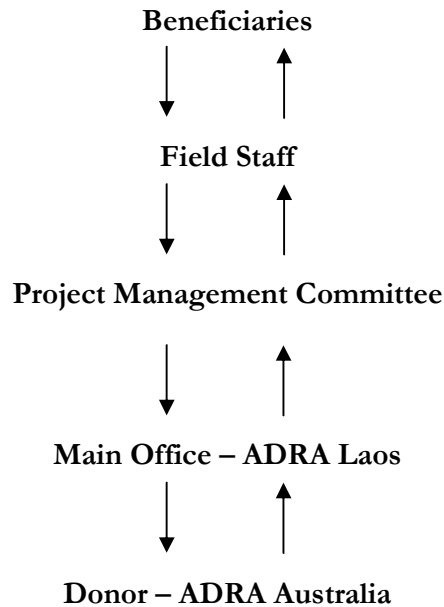
At committee meetings, stories were grouped by domain and read aloud. Most of the time, members came to a general consensus to select the story of most significant change. When necessary, they used formal voting. At the field level, many field staff collecting stories were also on the PMC that selected the stories. In several PMC meetings where an outsider was present to monitor the selection process, authors of stories did not influence the group to choose their own stories. In fact, often stories of staff members not present were selected over the stories submitted by committee members. It appeared that bias did not affect the selection process. After each meeting, the PMC prepared a report to send along with stories of change to the main office. Please see Appendix 6 for an example of the PMC report.

Step 6: Feedback

Equally important to the story selection process is feedback from different levels of the MSC monitoring system. At each level where selection takes place, those below must be informed of the stories of change selected and the reason for selection. Many other organizations using MSC have reported that this tends to be a weak point in the system. Therefore, it's important to plan very carefully to ensure that feedback is included in the design of your organization's MSC monitoring system.

MSC has been described as an ongoing conversation between stakeholders. Providing feedback in the MSC monitoring process means that information doesn't only flow one way; it flows two ways. Feedback can go beyond only sharing opinions about why changes are important. Committees may find they have recommendations for project management or implementation based on the changes described in the stories. These can be shared as well in the feedback process.

ADRA Laos. The following diagram was used to introduce the concept of MSC as an ongoing conversation between stakeholders to staff members of ADRA Laos. It also demonstrates the structure of participation and feedback in MSC.



At the monthly meetings of the MSC committee at ADRA Laos’ main office, a feedback report was prepared to return to the PMC of each project. In the feedback form, the committee identified which change was selected and the reason for selection. Additionally, the committee responded to recommendations for project management/implementation made by the PMC and made any other relevant comments. Please see Appendix 7 for an example of the feedback form used. The donor, ADRA Australia, gave feedback to the main office about which changes were selected and why. This was shared with the PMC.

One of the weaknesses during the pilot project was lack of follow-up on feedback, particularly for negative changes. Although the main office consistently sent feedback to the PMC on changes reported and recommendations made, there was not a process in place to follow-up and document that recommendations for improvements in project activities had been done. In many cases, the PMC did follow-up but did not inform the main office. In other cases, the follow-up did not take place. After the completion of the pilot project, ADRA Laos decided to focus heavily on following through with recommendations made and documenting the process.

Step 7: Training Staff

Training staff is an important step to think through before beginning the MSC monitoring system. Ideally, staff members should be involved in the design of MSC, or at least given the chance to provide input before it is implemented. Staff members can receive initial training on MSC at the same time they are contributing to the design of the monitoring system. The enthusiasm of staff to implement MSC will be much higher if they are involved in designing a unique MSC monitoring system for your organization. Keep in mind that training will be an on-going process. Follow-up training and monitoring trips to assess the progress of field staff are essential.

Because language can be one of the biggest barriers in training, it is important to plan accordingly. For training local staff, it is best to have hand-outs translated in the local language. If the individual responsible for training is a foreigner, he/she should ensure that at least one staff member who speaks the local language understands MSC very well and can assist in the training.

ADRA Laos. The MSC monitoring system was first introduced to ADRA Laos staff at a two-day start-up workshop at the main office. Two to three representatives from each project and several staff members from the main office attended the workshop. The training began with a simple exercise where participants wrote stories of change, discussed them, and went through a selection process. This was the most effective aspect of the training because it gave participants a tangible experience with MSC. An overview of the proposed MSC monitoring system was presented, and staff had the chance to make suggestions for changes. Several revisions to the monitoring system were made during this workshop, including method of collection, how the main questions were phrased, and revisions to the form for stories of change. As mentioned earlier in Step 4, staff members suggested using interviews instead of focus groups because they felt this would work better in the field. The main questions were revised, since the original ones were complex and difficult for the majority of staff to understand (see Step 4). Quite a bit of time was spent revising the form for stories of change, to ensure that staff members knew what was required under each question. The start-up workshop was a successful way of introducing MSC because staff members were given an opportunity to make suggestions to the system before it was implemented. However, this first training session included too much of the theory behind MSC, and was too complicated for some participants. Thus, one of the lessons learned in training staff is to present MSC in a simple way that is easy to understand.

After the initial training at the main office, training was conducted at the field offices for all project staff. Those who attended the start-up workshop assisted in the field workshops. Because many of the staff members did not speak English, those that attended the start-up workshop were very helpful in translating and explaining MSC to other staff members. Based on the lessons learned from the start-up workshop, the field training focused on four simple elements: 1) Why ADRA Laos is using MSC, 2) The two main questions guiding MSC monitoring, 3) How the selection process works at the PMC level, and 4) How to write stories of change. The field-based workshops included one day of introduction to the MSC monitoring system, two days of story collection in the field, and a half-day for the PMC meeting where members were introduced to the selection process for stories of change.

Several months after the pilot project began, follow-up and additional training were given at the field sites. Field staff were asked to identify strengths of MSC, as well as any challenges and problems they had faced with the monitoring system. Training was given on the specific problem areas mentioned by staff. Another important aspect of the training was analysis of actual examples of stories reported by field staff. The training presented examples of good stories, and there was discussion about the strong points in these stories. Stories that need improvement were also presented, with training focusing on specific weak areas that needed improvement. Examining stories written by project staff proved to be a very effective method of training.

At the end of the pilot project, an evaluation workshop was held to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the monitoring system, and how it could be improved. The group worked on a revised MSC monitoring system based on these discussions. This served as an important part of ongoing training for staff.

Step 8: Verification

In order to establish the credibility of MSC monitoring in your organization, it is important to include a verification process. Project directors or management staff can visit villages where changes were reported, and try to verify that the changes actually happened. If those writing stories know that their stories may be verified, they are encouraged to write accurate stories. There are different methods of verification; some choose to verify only stories selected at several levels. Others choose to verify stories at random.

ADRA Laos. In Laos, verification of stories was done during the pilot project to a small extent. However, the majority of verification of stories was done during the external evaluation at the end of the pilot project. During the external evaluation, stories from several villages were chosen for verification. This verification included stories that were selected at various levels of MSC monitoring, as well as stories that were not selected by any group. One interesting finding in the pilot project in Laos was that field staff often reported that beneficiaries reported stories that were not true. This issue was brought up during monitoring visits to the projects. It was decided that the project staff themselves could verify stories from beneficiaries. If a project staff member knew that a change reported by a beneficiary was not true based on what he/she observed in the village, the staff member would not submit that change. In the case of ADRA Laos, there was more need to verify that beneficiaries were telling true stories than to verify that project staff members were writing accurate stories.

Step 9: Dealing with Obstacles

Inevitably, difficulties and obstacles will arise during the implementation of MSC monitoring. If you are able to anticipate these challenges and address them at the beginning of the process, it will be extremely helpful. To deal with unexpected obstacles, remember that the MSC monitoring system is flexible and can be adapted to your needs.

ADRA Laos. One of the most difficult obstacles for ADRA Laos in implementing the MSC monitoring system was dealing with the language barrier. In each of the projects, only a couple of the staff members spoke English. A large majority of them could not communicate in English. Because the coordinator of the MSC pilot project knew very little of the local language, Lao, training in the MSC monitoring system was difficult. All training needed to go through a translator. What was helpful in the case of ADRA Laos was to ensure that the translator (the project director) understood the MSC system very well. The project director would then need to ensure that the non-English speakers understood the system. Also, translation of handouts to explain the system was very helpful. These presented the most important concepts of MSC in a simplified way. In follow-up training, actual MSC stories written in Lao were used to demonstrate strengths and weaknesses of various stories. This was an effective training method that addressed the challenging language barrier.

Translation was another one of the main difficulties encountered in the projects. Only a few individuals at the project level had the ability to do translation of the stories from Lao to English, and it was a time-consuming process. At the main office, several staff members were capable of translation, but also did not have time to translate the stories every month. To ensure that MSC continued on a monthly basis, the translation was left to the project staff. However, this continued to be a difficult issue for them.

Time constraints were another challenge of the pilot project. Because it was a pilot project, MSC monitoring created additional work for project staff. Writing stories, translating stories, and participating in MSC selection meetings were added responsibilities for project staff on top of their normal work load. In the future, ADRA Laos is planning to incorporate MSC monitoring into its projects so that it is included in the normal responsibilities of project staff.

Step 10: Evaluation of the Monitoring System

At some point during MSC, the monitoring system should be evaluated. An excellent opportunity to do an evaluation is at the completion of the pilot project. As a result of the evaluation, revisions can be made to improve the system. Since MSC monitoring is likely to be an evolving process, it would also be good to evaluate the system at regular intervals thereafter as circumstances within the country office change.

ADRA Laos. To obtain an external view of the MSC pilot project in ADRA Laos, an independent consultant was hired to conduct the evaluation. Please contact ADRA Laos if you would like a copy of the external evaluation report. In addition, ADRA Laos planned an evaluation workshop at the completion of the pilot project. During the workshop, representatives from both projects participating in MSC and the main office made presentations about what they felt were the strengths and weaknesses of MSC, as well as how it could be improved in the future. The evaluation workshop revealed a high level of enthusiasm and commitment for MSC monitoring among field staff and management staff. In spite of the challenges faced during the pilot project, ADRA Laos staff were eager to find solutions to the problems and continue with MSC monitoring. Participants at the workshop

worked on developing a revised MSC monitoring system based on the information given in the presentations and their experience during the MSC pilot project.

Step 11: Revising the System

The MSC monitoring system should be open for revisions and adaptations. Many of these revisions can be made during the initial training. Still other revisions may come up after you have already begun using the system. MSC should be adaptable, and the revisions you make will depend on the unique situation of your organization. As mentioned earlier, if you decide to begin with a pilot project, an excellent time to revise the system is after the completion of the pilot.

ADRA Laos. At the evaluation workshop at the end of ADRA Laos' pilot project, many revisions to the MSC system were agreed upon. Participants decided that MSC monitoring should be extended to additional projects of ADRA Laos. In the revised system, ADRA Laos agreed that more than only field staff would be able to write stories of change. Any staff member would be able to submit stories, including management staff. Since using two separate forms for interviews with villagers and observation of field staff had caused confusion during the pilot project, it was decided that a single form would be used. The new form focused on interviews with beneficiaries, but included a section for project staff to write their observations. Participants contributed to revising this form. Please see appendix 5 for the revised form. Finally, in the revised system, the group felt strongly that a definite process should be in place to follow-up feedback from MSC monitoring.

However, there were several issues where the staff members held different opinions. Some ADRA Laos staff felt that there should be fewer domains to simplify MSC monitoring. They felt two domains – positive changes and areas to improve/negative changes – could include all potential stories and simplify the process. Another reason given for using these two domains is that all ADRA Laos projects using MSC could use the same domains. Other staff felt that there should be three or four domains used, with at least one domain based on the individual goals of each project. Another area where staff members did not agree was on the reporting period. Some participants felt the monthly reporting period used in the pilot project should be continued, since it would allow ADRA Laos to respond quickly to changes reported. They argued that MSC should be given high priority just like administrative or finance meetings. Others felt that the revised MSC system should use a quarterly reporting period, especially since it would allow more time to follow through with feedback. During the workshop, a compromise of a two-month reporting period was also discussed. Some suggestions were made for how the verification process could be done, such as including verification visits in the monthly plans of project team leaders or in monitoring trips of management staff. There was also debate concerning how the translation issue should be settled, and whether project staff should continue doing translation or an external person should be hired to assist at least part-time. At the time of writing the MSC Guide, final decisions on these issues had not been made by management of ADRA Laos. Regardless of the decisions that are made, the valuable achievement of the evaluation workshop is that it gave staff members the opportunity to give input into the revised MSC monitoring system.

Additional Resources

A wide variety of information about MSC and its applications all around the world - including documents about the initial development of the MSC by Rick Davies - can be accessed through a yahoo email group. During the development of its MSC monitoring system, this was an invaluable resource for ADRA Laos. The address of the yahoo group is: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MostSignificantChanges>.

For immediate access to the document about the original application of MSC by Rick Davies, visit www.mande.co.uk/docs/ccdb.htm.

Appendix 1

Story of Change Selected by All Stakeholders: Changes in People's Health

ADRA Laos MSC Pilot Project

Domain:	CHANGES IN PEOPLE'S HEALTH
Villager or Observation:	Story reported through interview with villager.
Project:	LWP and REACH
Person reporting:	Viengphone
Date of report (Day/Month/Year):	11 March 2004
Name of Village and Name of District:	Km 44 village, Luangnamtha District
What is your name? (Mr./Mrs. first name and family name)	Mrs. Kham Mee
How old are you?	57 years old
Basic idea of change:	Doesn't get sick from dysentery anymore.
WHAT happened?	She didn't get sick from dysentery anymore after ADRA provided health education.
WHEN did the change happen? (give a specific month)	The end of 2003
Details of the change: (HOW and WHY did the change happen?)	"Before ADRA came, I didn't know how to clean food before eating or boiling water before drinking. Also, I didn't fence my animals so I got sick from dysentery every year. After ADRA came last year (2003) they gave health information to me and I started to boil water, clean food, especially vegetable before eating. I also fenced my animals so now I don't get sick from dysentery anymore."
How did ADRA help with this change?	"ADRA provided health education to me. Especially they explained to drink boiled water, eat cooked, well-done food, clean vegetables and fruits before eating, and fence animals so they are not allowed to run around the village."
<i>Only for stories from villagers.</i> Why is this change important to	"Because my family and I are healthy and don't get sick anymore. I don't have excrement around my

the VILLAGER (person in story)?	house. There's no bad smell anymore and when my friends from other villages visit us, we aren't shy."
As a project staff member, why is this change important to you? Is it positive or negative?	It's positive because she knows how to protect herself from diseases. It's not only changing health, but it changes their habits also.
PMC reason for selection:	Ms. Kham Mee's health has improved, and she also has knowledge of hygiene and practices it in her family. She is a good example for other people.
Vientiane Committee reason for selection:	We selected this story because it shows a clear connection between actions taken from health education, and how this can positively affect a person's health. The villager herself understood the connection between the change in habit and the improvement in her health. Also, we felt it was important that since the woman has changed, it will benefit the rest of her family as well.
ADRA Australia reason for selection:	We can clearly see the impact of health education and a local understanding of the concepts promoted. It's exciting to see the diffusion of this impact to the broader community.

Appendix 2

Story of Change Selected by All Stakeholders: Changes in People's Behavior

ADRA Laos MSC Pilot Project

Domain:	CHANGES IN PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOR
Villager or Observation:	Story reported through interview with villager.
Project:	ACTION Health
Person reporting:	Phetduangchan
Date of report (Day/Month/Year):	12 November 2003
Name of Village and Name of District:	Boungvai village, Saisettha District
What is your name? (Mr./Mrs. first name and family name)	Mr. Bounthieng
How old are you?	44 years old
Basic idea of change:	Medicine better than sacrifice.
WHAT happened?	Using medicine
WHEN did the change happen? (give a specific month)	Since 2003
Details of the change: (HOW and WHY did the change happen?)	Before when my family got sick we had to do sacrifice of animals. Because we had health education, when my family gets sick we will go to the hospital instead of doing sacrifice. We can save our animals to do other work.
How did ADRA help with this change?	Provided health education
<i>Only for stories from villagers.</i> Why is this change important to the VILLAGER (person in story)?	When we use medicine it's better than sacrifice because we can keep our animals. We don't have to kill a buffalo that is worth a lot of money.
As a project staff member, why is this change important to you? Is it positive or negative?	Before they believe in spirit, and they don't know about disease.

PMC reason for selection:	The villagers use medicine and go to the hospital.
Vientiane Committee reason for selection:	This story is about a very big change in beliefs as well as behavior – it shows that the project is having a big impact for this person.
ADRA Australia reason for selection:	We felt this story showed how ADRA's intervention demythologized their religion and promoted a more economically viable medical alternative.

Appendix 3

Story of Change Selected by All Stakeholders:
Changes that Reflect an Area to Improve/Negative

ADRA Laos
MSC Pilot Project

Domain:	CHANGES THAT REFLECT AN AREA TO IMPROVE (NEGATIVE)
Villager or Observation:	Story reported through interview with villager
Person reporting:	Seesoukhan
Project:	ACTION Health
Date of report (Day/Month/Year):	19 Feb 04
Name of Village and Name of District:	That Sang Village, Sansai District
What is your name? (Mr./Mrs. first name and family name)	Mrs. Yeo
How old are you?	25
Basic idea of change:	Skin disease
WHAT happened?	She has skin disease on her body
WHEN did the change happen? (give a specific month)	January 2004
Details of the change: (HOW and WHY did the change happen?)	“Before we didn’t have a well. The people had to go to the stream called Huay Poh. They had to go one time per day because the stream was quite far. Now that we have a well close to our house, we can take a bath and clean our clothes easily. We can take baths as many times as we want. After I took a bath at the well for a while, I got skin disease on my arms legs and it’s very itchy. When I scratch them, there is blood and yellow infection. I have not gone to the doctor. If I hadn’t taken a bath from the well, I don’t think I would have gotten this skin disease.”
How did ADRA help with this change?	The project provided a well to give people clean water to use and gave health education to let villagers know they should clean their body, and clothes must be washed and dried in the sun before wearing.

<p><i>Only for stories from villagers.</i> Why is this change important to the VILLAGER (person in story)?</p>	<p>Before the villagers used water from Huay Poh to bathe, wash clothes, and not any disease happened. Their bodies were in good condition. Nowadays, after using water from the well to bathe, wash clothes, and drink, we have infection in our bodies, especially on the legs and arms. It's itchy, and when we scratch, the skin infection spreads.</p>
<p>As a project staff member, why is this change important to you? Is it positive or negative?</p>	<p>It's a change in a negative way because Mrs. Yeo never got skin disease before. When she takes a bath many times, she feels itching on her arms and legs. It's itchy and she cannot be patient and she has to scratch it, which brings blood and yellow infection. She thought that because of using water from the well, she got skin disease.</p>
<p>PMC reason for selection:</p>	<p>No reason given</p>
<p>Vientiane Committee reason for selection:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This story is significant because it is a negative event that could impact the project's ability to work with the community. - The story demonstrates the importance of talking to villagers, because we would not have been aware of this problem if we hadn't asked. - ADRA does health education to teach people how to get rid of disease. This was an unexpected result, since the woman was blaming ADRA for the skin disease. - It also identifies another health problem in the village.
<p>ADRA Australia reason for selection:</p>	<p>ADRA is perceived as having brought about an overall negative impact to the village through this intervention. This point strongly highlights how this type of feedback can help ADRA.</p>

Appendix 4

Story of Change Selected by All Stakeholders: Changes in Any Other Area/Open

ADRA Laos MSC Pilot Project

Domain:	CHANGES IN ANY OTHER AREA (OPEN)
Villager or Observation:	Story reported through interview with villager.
Project:	LWP and REACH
Person reporting:	Vongmany
Date of report (Day/Month/Year):	23 February 2004
Name of Village and Name of District:	Khon Tou village
What is your name? (Mr./Mrs. first name and family name)	Mr. Meunboun
How old are you?	50 years old
Basic idea of change:	Habit
WHAT happened?	There is a latrine, but he doesn't want to use it
WHEN did the change happen? (give a specific month)	February 2004
Details of the change: (HOW and WHY did the change happen?)	Since I was born, I always use the forest instead of the latrine. When I go to the field on the mountain, I use the forest instead of a toilet. Up to now, the project has built the toilet and the staff has advised us to use the latrine because it is better than the forest, and can reduce diseases such as diarrhea. I know this, but I have never used the latrine because when I get inside the latrine, it makes me want to vomit because I am not familiar with the smell of the latrine. So, I decide to use the forest instead of the latrine. The head man of the village has warned me before and fined me one time for 5,000 Kip. In the future, I will try.
How did ADRA help with this change?	ADRA has built the latrine. They have given knowledge about how to take care of health, such as by using latrines in the right way.

<p><i>Only for stories from villagers.</i> Why is this change important to the VILLAGER (person in story)?</p>	<p>No answer.</p>
<p>As a project staff member, why is this change important to you? Is it positive or negative?</p>	<p>This change is very important. To make villagers become familiar with new things, we try to change their old behavior to be new behavior gradually. This change is a negative change, but it's very important to be a lesson for me in the future and find a way to solve this problem.</p>
<p>PMC reason for selection:</p>	<p>Some people in the village still use the forest instead of the latrine. The project should increase the health education program, and give more information about the danger from passing fecal matter everywhere.</p>
<p>Vientiane Committee reason for selection:</p>	<p>We felt this story was significant because it describes the barriers to behavior change in a very detailed way. It reveals the thinking of villagers in making decisions. This is a story that shows the process of changing behavior. ADRA has convinced Mr. Meunboun that using latrines is a good idea, but he has not put this into action.</p>
<p>ADRA Australia reason for selection:</p>	<p>We felt that this example provided more opportunity for learning through what was done wrong, rather than what was done right. The 50-year-old man would be of considerable influence in the village, and although the village was fining him for his errancy, he would be sending mixed messages to the rest of the community.</p>

Appendix 5 - Revised form for Story of Change

ADRA Laos

MSC Story of Change

General Information

Project:	
Domain:	
Person reporting:	
Date of report: (date/month/year)	
Name of Village and Name of District?	

Information from Villager

What is your name? (Mr./Mrs. First name and then family name)	
What is your age? (If you don't know, make an estimate).	
Topic of change:	
When did the change happen? (Approximate month and year)	
What happened?	
How did the change happen?	
Why did the change happen?	
Did ADRA help with this change? (Yes or No) If Yes, how?	
Is this change important to the villager? Why?	

Information from Staff

What are your observations about the change?	
Why do you think this change is important?	
What should ADRA do based on this story?	

Management Information

PMC selected or not selected:	
Why did the PMC select this story?	
PMC recommendations:	
VTE selected or not selected:	
Why did the Vientiane committee select this story?	
VTE feedback on PMC recommendations:	

Appendix 6 – Example of Report from Project Management Committee (PMC)

MSC Pilot Project Report from PMC	
Project:	ACTION Health
Month:	February 2004
Total number of stories collected:	10
Groups	
# Change in people's behavior (total)	6
Villagers	6
Observation	-
# Change in people's health (total)	0
Villagers	-
Observation	-
# Negative changes (total)	1
Villagers	1
Observation	-
# Changes in any other area – Open (total)	3
Villagers	3
Observation	-
Staff members:	
Viengmany	2
Thongsavanh	1
Hongkam	1
Pod	0
Phetduangchan	2
Vieng Samay	2
Seesoukhan	2
Manisone	0
PMC Recommendations	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Take a photo of Mrs. Pouh as an example 2. When the project does health education in other villages, we can explain the picture to the villagers so they can use the waste water like Mrs. Pouh did for the vegetable gardening. 3. For the dry latrine, the project can take the example of the woman who constructed his own dry latrine and promote this in other villages in health training. The other people who hear this story will want to do the same. 4. We need to give the right message to the people for using the water. They need to give the message that different people have different reactions to the water from the well. And to encourage people to clean their bodies. 	

Appendix 7 – Example of Feedback from Main Office to PMC

**Most Significant Changes Pilot Project
Report on ADRA Laos Committee Meeting
Story selection for Action Health Project - February 2004**

Date: 5 March 2004

From: Mark, Pamouane, Esther, Robyn, Quentin, Gay (Invitee), Latdavanh (Invitee)

To: ACTION Health PMC

Selection

Group/Domain	Selected Story	Reason for Selection
Changes in Behavior	Mrs. Pheo, Dry latrine using in the family, That Sang village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This story is significant because it demonstrates a change in knowledge transferring to a change in behavior. - It shows that the health education is making a difference. This can be used an example for other villages. - The change is also important because the latrine saves time for the family, and is also much healthier for the family. It is a positive example for the children in the family.
Changes in Health		No changes reported this month
Negative Changes	Mrs. Yeo, skin disease, That Sang village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This story is significant because it is a negative event that could impact the project's ability to work with the community. - The story demonstrates the importance of talking to villagers, because we would not have been aware of this problem if we hadn't asked. - ADRA does health education to teach people how to get rid of disease. This was an unexpected result, since the woman was blaming ADRA for the skin disease. - It also identifies another health problem in the village.
Any Other Changes	Ms. Phou, planted small vegetable garden for family, Thahin village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We felt this change was important because re-using water shows that the family really values water as a resource. Ms. Phou can serve as a good example to other villagers.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The fact that the family is earning an income is very important. Also, it means that they will be able to pay for maintenance of the well.
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Response to PMC recommendations:

PMC Recommendation 1: Take a photo of Mrs. Phou as an example. When the project does health education in other villages, we can explain the picture to the villagers so they can use the waste water like Mrs. Phou did for the vegetable gardening.

VTE Response: We think this is an excellent idea! Let us know how it turns out. Maybe they could also take some people from another village to go and visit Mrs. Phou and see how she uses the waste water.

PMC Recommendation 2: For the dry latrine, the project can take the example of the woman who constructed his own dry latrine and promote this in other villages in health training. The other people who hear this story will want to do the same.

VTE Response: Also a good idea! Maybe the project could learn why the health education made a difference for this specific person.

PMC Recommendation 3: We need to give the right message to the people for using the water. They need to give the message that different people have different reactions to the water from the well. And to encourage people to clean their bodies.

VTE Response: We recommend that the project should **not** tell the villagers to be careful of water from the wells because of skin disease. It is very unlikely that the disease was caused by the water from the well. Instead, the project should find out how many people are using the well, and how many people have the skin disease. The project could arrange for a medical check-up for this person and others with skin disease to find out the cause of the problem. It would be good to hire a medical doctor who is an expert in skin diseases to do this. We need to make sure villagers have trust in ADRA, and this could help. Perhaps it would be helpful for the Action Health project staff to take additional health training so they can deal with issues such as skin disease.

Other comments:

- Next month, we would really like to see more changes through observation by the project staff.
- Very good job with your story writing – it has really improved! Seesoukhan and Vieng Samay have done an excellent job with their stories this month! Thanks so much for your hard work. The stories you send are very helpful to us.