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**'Most Significant
Change'**
Pilot Project
Evaluation Report

Prepared by

Institute for Sustainable Futures

For

ADRA Laos



University of Technology, Sydney

Institute for Sustainable Futures

□ *UTS June 2004*

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Pilot Project
Evaluation Report

Final Draft

For ADRA Laos

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides both a formative and summative evaluation of the pilot project implemented by ADRA Laos using the 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) monitoring system. It captures the lessons learned for other ADRA agencies, which may wish to implement this monitoring system in their projects.

This innovative qualitative participatory monitoring system was piloted in the hope that it would help to improve project management and to provide evidence of program effectiveness. If successful, it might be a model replicable by other agencies.

The pilot project researched and designed a MSC system adapted to ADRA Laos' context, trained field staff in the methodology, helped them develop the necessary skills to use the MSC monitoring system and implemented the system for a period of six months.

The evaluation approach was qualitative and participatory. The main method was focus group discussions designed to enable learning for the participants contributing to the discussion. Some individual interviews were conducted. The areas of focus were primarily the efficiency, efficacy and effectiveness of the MSC system designed and implemented in the pilot project. In addition, the significance of certain changes to villagers was investigated, as well as the replicability and possible extension of ADRA Laos' MSC system.

The findings on the efficiency of the MSC system were firstly, that the benefits gained were considered well worth the time invested. Secondly, investigation of the efficiency of the pilot project activities revealed that overall the MSC system was successfully developed and implemented. The primary areas for improvement were story collection methods and greater attention to feedback mechanisms including accountability for recommendations made for project implementation based on collected stories. The ethics of not informing villagers of their participation in MSC, as took place in some cases, was questioned. In terms of efficacy, it was found that most of the goals envisaged for the use of the MSC system were attained. One exception was a goal focused on improving ADRA Laos' ability to determine the overall impact of projects. MSC is not designed to determine overall impact but rather, it gave insight into particular events and impacts of projects, including unexpected and negative changes. Although it is difficult to evaluate effectiveness of the MSC system after only six months, the significant shift in the thinking of staff at all levels of the organisation about development and what it means to do development work, is positive evidence toward the potential for MSC to help ADRA Laos to improve the quality of its development activities. It has certainly functioned in promoting organisational learning.

As the ADRA Laos MSC system is clearly functioning well, it is a replicable model for other development agencies. However, differences in context, staff, projects and donors will necessarily influence the design of MSC systems for other organisations. When adapted elsewhere it should be remembered that MSC is not a prescribed methodology, rather an evolving one, that needs to be adapted to suit the context in which it operates. The possible useful extensions of MSC that it is recommended that ADRA Laos consider are quantification of particular changes arising in MSC stories to help determine overall impact, better integration with other monitoring systems, *en masse* analysis of information once yearly and increased engagement and participation at the village level. An example of the latter is discussion of the significance of changes by groups of beneficiaries in the villages, which in this evaluation revealed their values and therefore their selection of the most significant change as different from other stakeholders.

In conclusion, MSC has had a significant impact on ADRA Laos, and with additional refinement, is likely to continue to serve the organisation's learning and development work. Other organisations contemplating using MSC will benefit from reading this report to gain insight both to what this monitoring system has to offer, and to the sensitivities and complexities associated with its use.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADRA	Adventist Development and Relief Agency
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
MSC	Most Significant Change
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
PMC	Project Management Committee

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Report Purpose

The primary purpose of this report is for ADRA Laos as a summative evaluation of their MSC pilot project. In addition, since ADRA Laos have decided to continue using MSC, this report is a formative evaluation of the MSC system to inform future improvements. Lastly, this report has been written to provide other development agencies with lessons learnt from the MSC pilot project conducted in Laos. In doing so I have attempted to demonstrate both the many and varied benefits ADRA Laos have identified from using MSC and to point out its limitations and complexities.

1.2 Pilot Project Background

This pilot project emerged from the observation by senior management of ADRA Laos of a growing trend, especially among their traditional donors, of questioning the effectiveness of NGO implemented projects. ADRA Laos identified a key strategic issue to be improvement of, and specifically more systematic and participatory, monitoring and evaluation of its development program. This was needed not only to improve the quality and performance of their development activities through provision of relevant management information, but also to improve their ability to demonstrate the organisation's program effectiveness to key stakeholders. They decided to pilot the 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) monitoring system¹ to determine it's ability to address these needs. It was felt that the majority of ADRA country offices in the region and globally are facing similar challenges and could benefit from the pilot project.

1.3 Pilot Project Overview

This section describes the projects for which the 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) monitoring system was implemented, the design of the ADRA Laos MSC system and other components of the pilot project that was conducted between November 2003 and May 2004.

The pilot project to trial the use of MSC was implemented for three of ADRA Laos' projects: two that work in tandem in the Luangnamtha region in the north of Laos and one in the southern region of Attapeu. The details of these projects are:

- REACH (Responsive Education and Action for Community Health), a health education project funded by ADRA Canada and Canadian International Development Aid (CIDA)
- LWP (Luangnamtha Rural Water Supply Project), a gravity fed water supply project funded by ADRA Australia and AusAID
- ACTION Health (Attapeu Communities Taking Initiatives on Health), a water, sanitation and health education project funded by ADRA Australia and AusAID

Based on an investigation of MSC in other contexts, an intern, with advice from the Assistant Country Director, designed an MSC system for ADRA Laos. Figure 1 shows how stories are collected and selected by different stakeholders. Field staff (all local Lao staff) collected one or two stories in any village that they happened to be working in during the month. Four domains of change delineated types of change. These were changes in health, changes in behaviour, negative change and any other change. These stories of change were collected by interviews with beneficiaries and from field staff observation. In interviews, the questions developed to ask the questions about change were: "What is the best change since ADRA's project?" and "What is the biggest problem due to ADRA's project?" However, these specific questions were used to varying extents, as is discussed later in the findings about efficiency.

¹ The original research about the development of this monitoring system can be found at www.mande.co.uk/docs/ccdb.htm and there exists an internet MSC mailing list at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MostSignificantChanges>

A specific form documented the MSC stories and included both the details of the change and why it was significant to the villager and the staff member. Appendix A shows some examples of stories collected and the format used. Each month, the project management committee (PMC) for each project (several of the field staff and the project director), read and analysed the stories. They selected one story reported by beneficiaries and one from their own observation in each domain (a maximum of eight stories) and sent them to the main office of ADRA Laos in Vientiane. They wrote recommendations for actions by field staff in response to stories and the issues they raised. Each month, a committee at the main office met to select the 'Most Significant Change' in each domain. The committee at the main office sent a feedback report each month to the PMC, giving comments on the PMC recommendations. The committee selected one story in each domain. The final stories selected from six months of monitoring were sent to ADRA Australia.



Figure 1: Collection and selection of stories of change by different stakeholders

In addition to implementing this MSC design, the pilot project involved writing an MSC Guide², which compiled the lessons learnt, together with a description of the process. This guide is available from ADRA Laos in electronic format.

The final step in the MSC pilot project has been this external evaluation and report, which will be sent to all stakeholders and other interested parties, as well as ADRA country and regional offices.

² The ADRA MSC Guide is available through the MSC mailing list located at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/MostSignificantChanges>

2 EVALUATION DESIGN

2.1 Evaluation Methodology

The process of inquiry used for this evaluation was primarily participatory and qualitative. A qualitative approach was chosen because the focus of the evaluation was the experiences of the different stakeholders involved in using the MSC process. In addition, this approach was necessary to give an understanding of the context within which the pilot MSC project took place. A further reason for choosing this process of inquiry was that it facilitated a learning process for those involved. Discussions in groups allowed exchange of ideas and debate between participants and the chance to solve some of their own perceived problems with MSC. This process improves participant's depth of understanding and use of the MSC methodology.

The approach taken has the advantage of capturing the "lived experiences" of those using MSC. Some limitations should be noted. Firstly, I, as evaluator and investigator, inevitably affected the information given to me by the participants. Since the evaluation was conducted over a short time period, there was little time to develop trust and rapport to make sure that participants were comfortable telling me honestly how they felt or what they had done. Secondly, each participant had a particular perspective and view of MSC, depending on their particular circumstance and role. As far as possible, I have tried to retain the richness provided by these different interpretations, but in the synthesis to write this report, inevitably some viewpoints may have been missed or inadequately represented. Thirdly, communication by spoken language is integral to participatory methodology and the necessary passage through translation between Lao and English necessarily limited, and may have distorted communication between myself and both field staff and beneficiaries. By being aware of these issues, I have made every effort to overcome these limitations as far as I was able.

In terms of consent of participation, with each group or individual from ADRA Laos I informed participants about the purpose of the evaluation and advised them that their identity would be protected. Due to the issue of language, I obtained verbal consent rather than written consent for their participation. Prior to our village visits, we informed people by letter that an evaluation was being conducted and I would wish to discuss changes in their village with certain individuals and a group.

The focus of the evaluation was broad, as it was designed to act as both a summative evaluation of the pilot project, and as a formative evaluation for ADRA Laos' future efforts in using MSC, and for other development agencies that might choose to use MSC.

The efficiency, the efficacy and the effectiveness of the methodology were all investigated. In addition, possible improvements to how the methodology is employed have been suggested based on participant's propositions of change, the barriers and difficulties experienced by different participants in the process, and based on other literature about MSC as it has been used in other contexts. In addition, by comparing the context of two other ADRA offices, the replicability of the MSC system used by ADRA Laos was explored.

2.2 Evaluation methods

Focused discussion took place with either groups or individuals. The range of people consulted included:

Management staff in Vientiane: Country Director, Associate Country Director, Health Co-ordinator, Logistic Co-ordinator, Water and Sanitation Technical Advisor, Intern;

Field staff in Luangnamtha: Project manager, project directors (x2), field staff (x7), project beneficiaries in three villages;

Field staff in Attapeu: Project director, field staff (x7), project beneficiaries in 3 villages; and

Staff from other ADRA offices: Thailand (x1) and Cambodia (x1), Australia (x4).

The evaluation workshop for the pilot project was conducted during the first two days of this external evaluation. Both management staff and representatives of field staff from Luangnamtha (3 members) and Attapeu (2 members) attended this meeting. This meeting gave me the opportunity to:

- listen to internal reports and discussions about the pilot project and observe debate in devising an on-going system for MSC for ADRA Laos;
- conduct large and small focus groups with diverse participants (a mixture of both management and field staff). The focus was on: why ADRA Laos is using MSC, what ADRA Laos' goals for an on-going MSC system might be, possible ways of improving and extending MSC to increase its value to ADRA Laos, how the MSC system interacts with other monitoring systems, and perceptions of what constitutes desirable village level participation.
- conduct a quantitative evaluation of what time has been spent on MSC by management staff in Vientiane and by each of the two projects employing MSC in Luangnamtha and Attapeu; and
- interview certain members of the management staff on their views about MSC as regards its efficiency, efficacy and effectiveness and any concerns they had about the MSC system used in the pilot project.



Figure 2: Participants at evaluation workshop in Vientiane

Following the evaluation workshop, two field trips enabled contact with field staff and beneficiaries in villages at the two project sites, Luangnamtha and Attapeu. At each location, lengthy focus group sessions were held with all field staff including their project managers and project director. The aim of these discussions was to explore the feelings and experiences of field staff in using the monitoring system and to evaluate in detail how they carried out certain parts of the MSC system. In addition, in Luangnamtha, we were able to conduct some quantitative data collection for certain changes reported in MSC stories across all the villages in the project.



Figure 3: Discussion with field staff in Luangnamtha

written and I asked a range of questions to discover a more detailed picture of the story of change.

In the villages, two methods were employed for this evaluation, conducted at three villages in Luangnamtha and three villages in Attapeu. The first was to verify and follow-up certain stories of change. The choice of story was not limited to stories selected at PMC, Vientiane or Australian MSC meetings. Instead, a variety of stories were chosen with the aim of verifying their accuracy by gaining a more complete understanding of what lay behind the short stories written by field staff, and to follow up stories that were seemingly not quite complete. In each case, I was taken to the house of the person about whom the story had been

The second method employed at the village level involved a participatory discussion by the whole village (or group from the village in some cases), to decide on the most significant change within a set of two or three given changes. In Luangnamtha, the set of changes used were actual changes reported from the villages visited. In Attapeu, three positive changes and three negative changes (selected from among all the stories collected throughout all village in the Attapeu project) were discussed and prioritised by the villagers. The aim was to generate



Figure 4: Discussing changes at That Saeng Dang Village, Attapeu

discussion and participation at the village level and to compare local identification of the “most significant change” to the values and choices made about stories at the project management committee level, country level and donor level. This activity was also used to gain some insight into what future higher level of village participation and engagement might be possible.

Both before and after the evaluation took place in Laos, time was spent in discussion with staff members from ADRA Australia about MSC and their participation in the process.

range of stories collected (both selected and not selected), to examine the quality and content of stories provided by field officers. This gave insight into their level of understanding of the method. I also spent time examining the documentation of the reasons given for selection at different levels and the feedback given by the PMC and from the MSC meeting in Vientiane.

Finally, in addition to the empirical evidence collected from talking to people, I studied a

2.3 Findings

The findings have been organised into five sections. The first three of these sections address the efficiency, the efficacy and effectiveness of MSC as a monitoring methodology as it was used in the pilot project. The fourth examines the replicability of ADRA Laos’ MSC system. The final section presents findings about how villagers ascribe significance to different changes occurring in their community and assesses whether or not discussing changes with villagers in a group is a useful or appropriate extension to the MSC design as it currently stands.

2.3.1 Efficiency

Two aspects of efficiency were considered in this evaluation. Firstly, ADRA Laos was interested in how the benefits of MSC compared with the cost and these are presented below. Secondly, the efficiency of the pilot project itself was assessed. This involved investigating how well the project activities were implemented using the resources and time available. As a part of this, areas for future improvement are indicated and some of the lessons learnt are presented.

Benefits and costs of MSC

The benefits of using MSC turned out to go well beyond the organisation’s expectations of what a new monitoring system might be capable of achieving. As one staff member put it, “You need to directly experience the value of what this tool can give you.” It took time to convince certain management and field staff of the value of the approach. Now, at the end of the pilot project however, it was clear to me that a strong commitment to MSC has been generated throughout the organisation. Most staff at both the field level and management level felt that the time investment in introducing and using MSC was well worth the benefits that ensued. Below are given the benefits perceived by management and field staff and ADRA Australia. A summary of the actual time resources that the MSC pilot project consumed as well as staff perceptions of the time consumed follows.

Management staff perceptions of benefits of using MSC are that it:

- “has forced in-depth development thinking.”
- “has created deep changes in people’s thinking amongst the staff.”
- “showed us how difficult it is to change people’s behaviour.”

- “ helped us learn what actually happens, at least for some cases.”
- “ has created more awareness, sensitivity and focus in the field staff to dig deeper and find out how project outputs are perceived by the beneficiaries.”
- “ has shown a need for long term involvement with communities.”
- has started to break through a cultural barrier where Lao people only feel comfortable reporting good news and are embarrassed about reporting negative news.
- has the potential to inform future project design, particularly if linked to the strategic planning process.
- provides insights of the beneficiaries and their perspective of the project’s impact in their community.
- provides the insights to the misconception of villagers or field staff
- provides really powerful stories to use for donor reporting
- facilitates the ability of field staff to tailor activities to community needs because real needs and perceptions are identified. Field staff must talk to the beneficiaries and listen to their point of view.
- provides a way for beneficiaries’ points of view to go up the organisational ladder.
- shows unexpected impacts of the project that are not in the project proposal

Benefits of MSC as reported by field staff, captured mostly in their own words (translated):

- “we can work up close with villagers, not get shy, we open mind together.”
- “we can measure if work done is fruitful or not, did they understand, did they practice or not.”
- “we can know if there are health behaviour changes after giving training, maybe they have knowledge but do they practice it?”
- “we can measure if we have a good result in the village.”
- “we can know about the problems and help solve problems.”
- “we can make comparison before and after the project and the villager makes the comparison.”
- “we can know about the strong and weak points of the village and of the training we give.”
- “we know the feeling and opinion of the villager when working with the project.”
- “when we interview, we hear not only positive impact, also negative impact.”
- “the staff and the villager both know about the problem and can solve [it] together.”
- “I think it is important to give information to the donor about the project so in the future they will continue to fund it.”
- “it gives us time to look at our work and see what we have done.”
- “before we know how to provide clean water to the community, drill the well and leave, don’t think any further. After MSC we know positive and negative changes and unexpected impacts.”
- “before, I worked more in the office, went very few times to the field. After MSC and collecting stories in the field, can learn the real situation and reasons behind villagers’ actions.”

For ADRA Australia, MSC holds a slightly different significance. Their view of the potential benefits included:

- for marketing, to help “put a human face on development”
- for marketing, by highlighting the fact that ADRA is using this innovative method and how its use is leading to organisational learning

- for the appraisal and review panel (a panel of people external to ADRA Australia) to share the stories, find out about unintended change, understand the lessons learned
- for administration and finance staff, it gave them a chance to be exposed directly to what happens at the village level
- for the organisation as a whole, to help create dialogue about their purpose and to help demonstrate project impact and effectiveness.

The time costs of MSC are primarily in the investment in training for staff and secondly in monthly meetings and translation. The actual collection of stories themselves is not particularly time-intensive. Below are two tables that demonstrate the time-resources consumed during the pilot project period. Table 1 documents the total person-days or person hours for office staff in Vientiane and project staff in the field and Table 2 documents the average time spent per person (by dividing the overall time spent on a task by the number of people who participated in that task). It should be recognised that this average does not really represent the reality of the situation, as some staff members invested a far greater amount of time in the MSC process than others did. In addition to the time documented below, most ADRA Australia staff spent 1h in a selection meeting and the time it took to read the set of stories.

Table 1: Time-costs for MSC activities in pilot project expressed as total person-hours

Aspect of MSC	ADRA Vientiane	Luangnamtha	Attapeu
Managing the process (days over 9 month pilot)	60 days	6 days	6 days
Training (include eval w'shop) (days over 9 month pilot)	46 days	45 days	31 days
Travel for training (days over 9 month pilot)	8 days	9 days	9 days
Monthly activities (conducted for six months)			
Collecting stories (h/month)	0 h	24 h	12 h
Translation and typing stories (h/month)	3 h	10.5 h	12 h
Selecting stories (h/month)	22 h	42 h	28 h
Total monthly time resources used (h/month)	25 h	76.5 h	52 h
Total time spent over entire pilot project	133 days	117 days	85 days

or person days

Aspect of MSC	ADRA Vientiane	Luangnamtha	Attapeu
Managing the process (days over 9 month pilot)	8.6 days	0.8 days	0.9 days
Training (include eval w'shop) (days over 9 month pilot)	6.6 days	5.6 days	4.4 days
Travel for training (days over 9 month pilot)	1.1 days	1.1 days	1.3 days
Monthly activities (conducted for six months)			
Collecting stories (h/per month)	0.0 h	3.0 h	1.7 h
Translation and typing stories (h/per month)	0.4 h	1.3 h	1.7 h
Selecting stories (h/per month)	3.1 h	5.3 h	4.0 h
Total monthly time resources used	3.6 h	9.6 h	7.4 h
Total time spent over entire pilot project	19.0 days	14.7 days	12.1 days

Table 2: Time-costs for MSC activities in pilot project expressed as average days or hours³

Perceptions about the time costs of using the MSC system are probably equally as important as that actual time spent on the system, so it is important to mention here the perceptions of different parties about this issue. Field staff from both projects repeatedly mentioned, "we have to do MSC in addition to our normal work.". They reported that they enjoyed the process and therefore gave up weekend time and additional time to complete MSC work. In the future it is hoped that time spent on MSC will be accounted for and given space within their normal work routine.

Efficiency of the pilot project

This section assesses how well the pilot project was conducted by determining to what extent the inputs to the pilot project resulted in the desired outputs. In doing so, the validity of the MSC design and implementation is assessed. Each of the project activities undertaken is

³ Calculation done on basis of 7 staff in Vientiane and 9 staff in both Luangnamtha and Attapeu.

considered individually and evidence from participants about how these activities were conducted is presented and evaluated. In essence, analysing the project efficiency in this way is testing the pilot project management hypothesis: *That one intern and one associate director can adequately train field staff and establish a sound MSC monitoring system for two development projects in nine months.* Certain recommendations for change and improvement to ADRA Laos' MSC system are made. These recommendations are extracted and listed more briefly in Section 2.4 to facilitate action upon them.

The complete set of activities that took place in the MSC pilot project consisted of the introduction of MSC to ADRA Laos, six months of implementation of MSC and evaluation of the MSC system. Introduction of MSC began with an initial investigation of MSC, choosing the domains of change and training of staff. Management of the MSC system took place throughout the pilot project. Implementation of MSC included collection of stories, analysis and selection of stories by PMC, selection of stories (Vientiane), selection of stories (Australia), feedback from Australia, feedback from Vientiane to PMC, feedback from PMC to project field staff and implementation of feedback by field staff. Evaluation of MSC consisted of the evaluation workshop and this external evaluation.

Each of these steps will be described individually, giving evidence of the time resources consumed, how well each step was performed with possible improvements that might be made.

Activities to introduce MSC to ADRA Laos

Initial investigation of MSC: It appeared to me that the initial investigation of MSC as a monitoring system was done well. The intern spent about ten days reading a diverse range of papers about the initial development of MSC by Rick Davies and Jessica Dart and studied how MSC had been applied in other development situations by other organisations. It was important that this learning took place, since although MSC is a seemingly simple monitoring tool, it is actually quite complex and one needs to be thoughtful, sensitive and adaptable in ensuring its appropriate application. Based on her reading and discussions with management staff, the intern developed a potential MSC system for use in ADRA Laos, and continued to refine and develop this system in an iterative fashion with field staff throughout the pilot project, adapting the system to meet their needs and skills.

Choosing of domains of change: Initially, the intern and assistant country director chose the domains based on the type of projects the MSC system was monitoring. The domains chosen were health, behaviour change, negative and open ("any other change") domains. Negative changes included situations where the project intended to catalyse a change (e.g. boiling water before drinking) but an interview or observation revealed that no change had taken place. The field staff had the opportunity to comment on these choices, but did not have a sufficient level of understanding at the beginning of the project to have other ideas. After six months experience with MSC, however, field staff now suggest that using two domains, open and negative, would simplify the process for them and think that they would still capture the sorts of changes that are of interest. They had experienced much confusion between the domains, particularly between health and behaviour. Jessica Dart⁴ indicates that the story collectors did not find a lot of value in the domains, but that they were useful for classifying changes at a later stage.

I would agree that using just two domains in the future is a good choice. This issue can be revisited after another period to check what has been lost or gained. This has the advantage that the MSC system for different projects could remain the same so if staff move between projects, it would be less confusing for them. The disadvantage is that one may miss capturing more specific changes of interest in terms of the project's desired impact. This limitation should be considered when deciding upon the best approach to domain definition.

Training of staff: Representatives of field staff attended two-day start up training sessions in Vientiane (two or three people from each project) and then two training sessions (initial training and follow-up training) of four days and two days respectively were held in the field at project sites. Training staff represents the largest part of time-resources invested in the

⁴ Dart J.J and Davies R.J. (2003) "A Dialogical, Story-Based Evaluation Tool: The Most Significant Change Technique", *American Journal of Evaluation*, Vol 24, No 2, pp137-156

MSC project, particularly as travel time between project sites and Vientiane was required in many cases.

In Luangnamtha, the number of days field staff spent in training for MSC varied from one day to seven days for different staff depending on their availability and the nine staff members spent an average of five days each. As the pilot project was conducted during the dry season, there were many other competing demands in project implementation work and not all field officers were able to attend all training sessions. Some staff that did attend felt that they had done so by foregoing other important work. In Attapeu, the number of days spent in training for MSC varied from three days to seven days for different field staff depending on their availability an average of four days for each of the nine staff members.

Field staff generally felt that the initial introduction of MSC was complex and difficult to understand. Equally, management staff observed their difficulties in comprehending the concepts involved. This was particularly true for the start-up workshop in Vientiane, where the intern acknowledges that she included too much theoretical material and needed to have presented only the core concepts and nothing more. The initial training in the field was similarly quite difficult for both the intern acting as trainer and the field staff, however, it did give field staff a basis to start talking to villagers and writing stories, particularly as two days of practical training in the field helped them develop the confidence and skills required. They felt that the form devised for them to fill out for each story was helpful and enabled them to draw out greater depth of information from villagers than they would otherwise be able to do.

The follow-up training periods in the field worked the best, from the perspective of both the intern and field staff. By this stage, all members had had some experience in writing stories and concrete examples of good and bad stories could be used as a teaching aid. In addition, practical training conducted in the field benefited all staff. The follow-up training sessions tackled the issues of open rather than closed questions in obtaining a detailed story and some of the staff seemed to have grasped this concept, though not all. This is definitely an area requiring further improvement. During the follow-up training, most staff felt they were able to improve the quality of their stories and understood that the story was intended to be about the personal experience of a particular person, rather than a generalised comment about a change in that village.



Figure 5: Practical training in story collection in the field

Some possible improvements to the training process suggested by field staff were firstly, that all training material be presented in Lao, with the full step by step process clearly and simply written out in Lao. Many of the field officers struggled with the English language in the training sessions and despite translation, felt that matters were still confused and not explained clearly. Secondly, they thought that examples of good and bad stories at the outset of the training would be helpful for staff to gauge the quality and level of detail required. Although the standard story form contains the different categories, they said that there is no information given about the level of detail required and use of examples would be one way to provide that information. Thirdly, one field officer thought that the training period was too short and that one or two weeks was required, including time for theory and practical application in the field followed by feedback. Lastly, it was suggested that future training sessions be conducted in the rainy season so that all might easily attend.

Lessons learnt from the point of view of the intern who conducted the training, were that it would have been best to have a Lao staff member proficient in English available firstly to learn about MSC as a monitoring system, then help to develop materials in Lao and help with the training process. For follow-up training in the field, this same Lao staff member could listen to interviews between villagers and staff and observe the research techniques used by field staff and guide them appropriately. Another lesson learnt was that having familiarity

with the organisation before attempting to implement a MSC system would have been helpful so that materials could be designed appropriately.

The duration of training for staff for the pilot project appeared adequate. However, as certain concepts have not been fully comprehended by all staff, for example avoiding the use of directive questions, on-going training in MSC would be helpful to gradually overcome these difficulties, perhaps at an interval of once or twice a year.

Some formal training took place in Vientiane for office staff by attending the start-up workshop, though none in Australia. Instead, two members of ADRA Australia attended a workshop where ADRA Laos MSC system was described. More information provided to the donor would have perhaps facilitated better understanding of their role, as they expressed a lack of clarity about how and for what purpose they should participate from ADRA Laos' perspective. For instance, when asking them to select between stories, telling them explicitly that they should select the story that most fully represented the sort of outcome that they wished to fund may have been helpful and indicating any other type of feedback that would be helpful.

Activities to implement the MSC system

Management of the MSC system: The management of the MSC system was almost exclusively the responsibility of the intern during the pilot project. It was important that one person, committed to the process, played this role and maintained the momentum and enthusiasm to implement MSC in the organisation. Without this energy and commitment, the pilot project would not have succeeded as it did. In addition to preparing and facilitating the various training workshops, other tasks included encouraging and requesting stories from staff each month, arranging meetings at the Vientiane level and sorting and filing the stories. It is important that in the future another staff member is assigned these responsibilities to ensure the survival and success of the MSC system.

Collection of stories: Ensuring the collection of stories is done well is perhaps the most important step of the MSC process. The entire monitoring system rests upon the quality and validity of this information. Many factors influence the trustworthiness of this information and so considerable time is devoted here to analysing how the story collection was done and what improvements might be made. The issues covered here include the time resources used, the choice of villagers from whom stories were collected, the method used by field staff to interview villagers and extract stories from them, difficulties they encountered and the field staff's and my own assessment of the accuracy of stories they obtained through verification. Finally, some observations are reported based on reading a variety of stories from those collected throughout the pilot project.

In terms of use of *time resources*, the collection of stories did not take up significant time.



Figure 6: Story collection

Field staff usually took the opportunity to interview and talk with villagers in the village in which they happened to be working, rather than make specific journeys to villages only to collect MSC stories. In Luangnamtha, field staff spent an average of 3 hours per month collecting stories, and in Attapeu, they spent 1.7 hours each month. Overall, 139 stories were collected during the pilot project, of which 65% were based on interviews between field staff and villagers, and 35% were observation stories written by field staff. An average of eight stories was collected per staff member, however, the number varied between 1 and 26 for different staff members.

Where and from whom in the village community were stories collected? In Luangnamtha, 14 out of 18 project target villages were covered, and in Attapeu, 17 out of 30 villages were covered. The spread of stories was not even, however, with some villages, notably those where training took place, recording many stories whereas only one or two stories were recorded in some other villages.

Most field staff said that they talked to whomever they came across in the village. They also took the opportunity to ask questions of the families that they stayed with in the village. I was told that both many men and many women had been approached for stories. Women often speak Lao less fluently than men and so communication was sometimes difficult. Women also may be uncomfortable answering questions posed by a male field officer. Fortunately, there is a gender balance amongst field staff for both projects and so the female field staff could collect stories from women. One staff member said that they choose someone who looks friendly, who responds when you smile. No children had been asked for stories (though one staff member said that by joking around and talking with children one could learn a lot about the village, as long as the children were telling the truth). A smaller number of elderly people were asked for stories and staff reported that this group of people was talkative. Some staff interviewed the headman of the village, however, it was reported that this person is likely to tell field staff what they expect field staff want to hear, such as positive changes as a result of the project, as opposed to their honest view of the situation. This was confirmed by observation in the village that indicated that village headmen had not spoken the truth to field staff. Similarly, some field staff interviewed members of the village leadership committee (or in Attapeu, the water committee) but said that these people too, were more likely to report positive change. Some staff reported interviewing many health volunteers (members of the community), whereas other staff never interviewed this group.

Overall, it would appear that there has been no systematic method to the selection of informants in the villages. This has the disadvantage that certain groups of people may be omitted from the story collection process. It has the advantage that it does not take any additional effort to control and interviews may take place opportunistically rather than spending time searching for the right person to interview. The main group that seems to be systematically omitted from those interviewed, is young adult workers who are mostly in the rice fields, and are therefore often not present in the village at the time of story collection. Most of the field officers agreed that ideally, a full range of groups would be represented in the stories and it was “important because they have different ideas.” Thought should be given to the best way of ensuring that all groups are represented, or at least that one person for each project is given the responsibility to keep track of the types of villagers interviewed and which villages have been covered each month.



Figure 7: Field staff member and villager

Another question concerning informants, which was raised in discussion with the field officers, was whether or not the same person should be approached more than once. Staff felt that usually it was important to interview the same person at least twice, to follow-up on what they had said and confirm that for example, a changed practice had indeed continued. It was felt that in certain cases, it might be important to follow-up more frequently and monitor change as it takes place. This needs discussion and resolution at the management level and depends on the purpose of ADRA Laos' use of the monitoring system.

The next issue discussed is *how stories were collected* and what aspects might be improved. Initially, field officers turned up pre-announced in the villages with their interview sheets in front of them and pen in hand. This formal approach was found to be quick, but the quality and accuracy of the information obtained was low. Villagers would only report positive things and did not have sufficient trust to be open and honest. Instead, most field officers now talk “round and round” to obtain their story. They approach the villager with general questions that gradually lead toward questions about change within a particular domain (e.g. health, positive, negative, open). To obtain a detailed story, they then delve deeper, using pointed questions to find out the details and the reasoning behind any actions taken. The field officers said that sometimes they chose the domain before the interview, but they are always flexible and follow a different direction if an interesting point comes up in the conversation. This process is reported to usually take one to one and half hours, though occasionally may take 2–3 hours.

In Luangnamtha, where there is a high degree of trust between staff and villagers, field officers have let communities know that they are collecting stories of change. However, in Attapeu, they have not felt able to tell the villagers explicitly what they are doing, as field staff believe that villagers will be reticent and difficult to talk to if they do so. This issue concerning the ethics of not informing villagers of field staff's intention and the purpose of collecting stories needs to be addressed. Firstly, if at a later point in time, villagers discover that field staff have deceived them, trust between the villager and ADRA staff is likely to be undermined. Secondly, there exist international standards developed to protect the rights of subjects participating in research and according to these, as a minimum, informed consent of the subject is required. Such standards began within the health and medical profession⁵ but are now widely acknowledged and accepted within other spheres of research including social research and other research involving human subjects. The concept of privacy in a Lao context should be considered, as this has implications for how the issue is conceived and addressed. This issue is one that needs attention by management staff at ADRA Laos with a solution developed that respects the rights of villagers.

The actual approaches to interview a villager reported by field staff are best illustrated and understood by example, so four examples have been included here with some comments about each. Overall, I believe that there is more room for improvement in the research skills of field staff and that this issue be addressed in future training sessions:

1. "Do you remember about health education?" "What information do you remember?" "Ah, mosquito net...what about the mosquito net?" "Are you using the net?" This approach is not asking the person about the 'Most Significant Change' and displays the use of leading questions that are not desirable for the technique.
2. "Are you still working in the field?" "Is there enough rice for the whole year?", "How is your health?", "What changes have you had in your health..." This example is a little better, but is still slightly directive in its approach, depending on whether the intent is to collect a story for a particular domain of change (here, health), or whether the "most significant change" is sought.
3. If a field officer finds a person either using water (e.g. washing clothes or dishes), coming out of a latrine or building a fence, then they make an opportunity to ask the person about what they are doing and why. Many field officers said that they used this method and certainly it has the advantage of making the conversation relaxed and non-confronting to the villager. It may, however, miss capturing the "most significant change" in that villager's life, as the focus is on the activity of the villager at that moment.
4. Initial general conversation followed by a direct question such as "What is your life change since the project came to your area?" They said that this usually provokes many responses from the villager and field staff must ask again and again which is most important and why. They said that this is often a difficult concept to get across to the villager, particularly to be able to answer why the change is important. This is the most open form of question field staff felt able to use and is probably the closest to the intent of the MSC technique and should be encouraged amongst field staff.

Field staff reported facing a range of challenges in extracting stories. Some are:

- Lack of openness and trust; some villagers do not want to talk with project staff (particularly in Attapeu where staff are less familiar with the villagers and there is a harsher political environment).
- One member of the field staff said that most villagers do not understand the concept of "most significant change." As one field staff member put it, "They just know, now we have water. If I ask about the benefit from drilling the well, they don't see any. Before they had the river, but now they have other water."
- Many of the subjects of stories are repeated, and they found it hard to find a story about something new or different and did not want to keep writing and repeating the same types of stories.

⁵ See <http://www.wma.net/e/policy/b3.htm> for more detail

- Sometimes villagers do not speak Lao and the field staff member does not speak the ethnic dialect and communication is therefore difficult, if not impossible.

Some responses to and comments on these articulated difficulties are, respectively:

- Lack of openness and trust might be overcome by certain project designs, for example a design that requires staff to repeatedly visit the same village rather than just once. This problem may never be fully overcome, as a power dynamic inevitably exists between field staff and the villagers that will always affect communication between them.
- Villagers' reported lack of understanding of the concept of "most significant change" and reasons that justify a change as being significant may reflect a mismatch of the MSC methodology with the way Lao village people think. However, since many excellent stories have been collected in both Luangnamtha and Attapeu, this is perhaps not necessarily the case. To overcome this issue, field staff require skilled research techniques and to be able to communicate in terms that make sense to the villager.
- Variations of the same story could potentially be useful and should perhaps not necessarily be avoided. Personalised and detailed stories will always be different to one another even if the central idea of change is similar.
- Ensure that staff members who speak the ethnic minority languages go to the villages where language is the issue (even if it is an issue for just one group in the village, eg women) and make sure stories are still collected and that they are not omitted because it is seen as "too hard".

Verification of stories was done by field staff and as well as through this external evaluation. Field staff felt that they were in a good position to assess the truthfulness of stories they collected. They said that they did not include or write up stories that were obviously not true, or were observed to be untrue when they saw the real actions of the villager or villagers in their life. As mentioned earlier, the headman and village committee may be more prone to making up positive stories in the hope of pleasing field staff. The level of honesty of villagers in revealing their stories of change rests primarily on the level of trust and openness that can be established between the staff member and the villager. Such relationships take time to build for villagers to feel "safe" to talk openly. This is especially true in the case of reporting negative changes. In Luangnamtha, where there exists a greater trust and rapport between staff and villagers, 18 negative stories were reported (out of a total of 99 stories). In Attapeu, despite a lower degree of trust, six negative changes were reported out of 40 stories.

As a part of this evaluation, I verified six stories in Luangnamtha during visits to the villages and four stories in Attapeu to assess the truthfulness of the representation given by the story written by field staff. I found all the stories to have been accurately accounted, however, two points became evident to me in carrying out this verification process. Firstly, although the accuracy of the story written by staff was intact, in most cases, by talking in detail with the villager, I was able to glean much more information that would have made the story both more interesting and more insightful to other readers. I believe that based on this, it might be possible to ask staff to write more detailed stories that are even more personalised and particular to the situation of the particular villager that is being interviewed. They have already been given training in this regard, but continued emphasis on this aspect is needed. The second point that became evident is that a story of change is located specifically at a particular point in time, and in many cases that change had been superseded by other events and was no longer necessarily significant. Two examples of this are a story about a villager who continued to drink unboiled water despite health education, but who now (verified by other family members when I was present) always boils water. The second example was about a conflict regarding someone who without asking permission attached a pipe to the gravity fed water system directly to his house. When I verified this story, I found that the conflict had been resolved and dealt with by the villagers. These cases highlighted that we should remember that they are "point in time", particular cases rather than a picture of the overall impact of the project.

In *examining stories* that have been translated into English, I found that there was a visible improvement over the period of the pilot project. Even in the last month, however, it is clear

that some staff members were still confused about different aspects of the standard story form that they were using. For instance, in the part marked “How did ADRA help with this change?” they would list all of ADRA’s activities rather than one related to the story the villager told and expressed by the villager. In general, there has been a lot of confusion between writing, “what the villager said”, and using inverted commas to indicate this, and writing their own judgements and thoughts. Since interviews are written up later, this problem is exacerbated and the line between their interpretation and the raw information provided by the villager becomes blurred. This problem is not unique to ADRA field staff; it is common to all interpretative research work and is challenging even to highly skilled and qualified social researchers. The new revised story form, created at the evaluation workshop, might help with this issue, and make clear which parts of the form give voice to the villager, with a separate section where field staff may express their own opinion. The decision taken to only collect stories by interview (and not observation) has been made to simplify this issue for staff, but should be revisited in the future, as stories by observation are a valuable method by which to collect stories of change as perceived by field staff.

Translation of stories from Lao to English: This step in the process has caused considerable difficulty for both projects. The project directors, as their written English is good, spent significant time (10–12 hours per month) translating stories. This is not efficient use of their time, so other solutions need to be found for translating. One suggestion is that the reporting period be extended from one month to two or three months. Other possibilities are that staff with some English skills write their stories in English and that English training is given to all field staff, or that a translator be hired specifically to translate stories. As staff in Vientiane found when reading stories at their meetings, if the translation is poor, the message of the story is potentially lost or hidden and therefore good translation is imperative.

Analysis and selection of stories: The first level of analysis and selection of stories took place at a monthly PMC meeting where most field staff (some voluntarily) and the project directors were present. These meetings were reported to be enjoyable, with all stories read out and listened to, allocated to different domains of change, followed by much dialogue in deciding which stories represented “most significant change”. In terms of use of resources, these meetings were time intensive, taking up to one whole day (often on a weekend). Both projects reported that usually they were able to reach consensus through discussion and deliberation, and only a few times did they have to resort to voting to decide upon which story was more significant.

The monthly selection of stories at Vientiane was done by a core group of project staff, with a rotating member of administration/finances invited as well. Attendance by all the core group of staff was not achieved in every case due to competing demands. This was of concern to some members, who felt that full commitment throughout the organisation was necessary for the MSC process to provide real value. No specific criteria were used to judge significance and decision making took place through dialogue. One member expressed some concern that perhaps it was not always the most democratic process, as strong personalities or authority figures’ opinions sometimes dominated. A good mix of character types was thought to be important to make the discussion fruitful. Most members felt that the informal discussion that took place had great value and triggered innovative thoughts and deeper development thinking and that they had learned a lot by participating.

The selection for stories in Australia took place just once at the end of the pilot project. Firstly, one member of staff gave an introduction to MSC to all staff (including administration, finance, marketing and programs) and each person then had two days to read the stories and determine their story of choice. A meeting was then held, attended by most staff, and a discussion took place about different people’s reasons for their choice. In most cases, the most significant change for the group as a whole was easily determined.

Feedback processes: The first level of feedback was from the PMC to project field staff. The PMC was required to make a list of recommendations based on the stories each month. This has been done to varying degrees. In Luangnamtha, recommendations made by the PMC were mostly clear and useful. In Attapeu, sometimes recommendations were not made at all and sometimes a summary list of the changes was given rather than actual recommendations.

Feedback from Vientiane was done in the form of a document in English emailed to each of the project directors and it included the reasons for their selection of stories, their response to PMC recommendations, and any other comments or questions they had, particularly giving

further ideas on how to improve the story-writing. In examining this documentation, the information appeared useful and helpful for field staff and gave significant appreciation and encouragement to field staff for their work in writing and discussing stories of change. In Luangnamtha, this information was communicated to all field staff in Lao and put up on the wall. In Attapeu, the feedback did not reach field staff and they were not aware of what had been thought or said in Vientiane. This is a shame and communication of feedback to all field staff, in Lao, should be ensured in the future.

Feedback from Australia consisted of their reasons for selecting the four particular stories. These reasons were not detailed and did not reveal much of the conversation and deliberation that took place behind them. Thought should be given to what greater level of response might be useful; perhaps by making reference to the reasons stories were selected at PMC and Vientiane, or to why one story was selected over another. Additional information such as this would give more insight to ADRA Laos about the thinking that took place at the donor level and would make explicit the values and desires of the donor.

Implementation of feedback recommendations by field staff: In Luangnamtha, field staff felt that they had been able to adjust project activities such as the content of the health education, to account for changes they heard and to deal with issues that had been raised. In Attapeu, in discussion with the field officers, they felt that they had responded to stories of change and had acted upon them and gave a few examples where this had taken place. However, from the documentation and speaking with management staff, I believe that only a few have really been followed up and that the others remain to be acted upon. The need for a mechanism to check whether or not recommendations have been acted upon was identified at the evaluation workshop and is further discussed in the recommendations section of this report.

Evaluation of the MSC system

Evaluation workshop: The evaluation workshop was held over two days and was attended by management staff from Vientiane, three project members from Luangnamtha and two from Attapeu. Other field staff reported that they would have been interested to attend, especially to hear about the other projects' experience with MSC, but the logistics of drawing together both complete groups did not permit this. Excellent presentations were given by each of the projects on their experience with MSC, reporting strengths, weaknesses, examples of stories and ways that the information from MSC had been used. Presentations were made by a management staff member and by the intern in charge of MSC. Focus group discussions were held to decide upon the structure of an on-going MSC system for ADRA Laos. Diverse points of view on some important aspects of the system (recording period, domains) meant that consensus was not reached and these decisions (flagged in the recommendations section of the report) and other issues raised in this report, require a lengthy discussion at management level as the details of a revised MSC system for ADRA Laos is decided upon.

2.3.2 Efficacy

The efficacy of the MSC monitoring system used in the pilot project can be judged according to how well it met the goals that ADRA Laos had in mind when they chose to implement this system. These goals were:

- To increase the participation of stakeholders in the M&E process.
- To develop the analytical skills of field staff.
- To improve ADRA Laos' ability to determine overall impact of projects.
- To improve ADRA Laos' understanding of how projects are interacting with beneficiaries.
- To improve ADRA Laos' project management.

I will address each of these in turn, giving evidence for the extent to which each was met by the MSC pilot project.

Goal to increase the participation of stakeholders in the M&E process

To measure the extent to which this goal has been met, one needs to be clear about what previous participation in M&E took place, what constitutes “desirable” participation for each of the stakeholders and whether the actual participation was increased in that direction. Participation is a broad term with many meanings and can be viewed as a continuum from passive participation to self-mobilisation⁶. I will consider each of the stakeholders separately below.

Participation of beneficiaries: Previously, beneficiaries of these two projects appear to have taken little or no part in monitoring and evaluation. Field staff said that in the past only the headman of the village was consulted. Management staff and field staff did not hold a consensus on the exact nature of desirable beneficiary participation in monitoring. Since field staff felt that it was not possible to conduct workshops in the villages to discuss “most significant change”, beneficiary participation instead took place through an informal interview. As one field staff put it, “The villagers are involved because they are our partners, they provide information and what we do is based on what they say.” Additionally, beneficiary participation in monitoring has been to some extent without their knowledge that they were doing so, though as mentioned earlier, in Luangnamtha, staff did inform villagers that they were collecting stories of change to help project implementation. I would therefore say that, beneficiary participation in M&E has definitely increased, certainly their ideas have been given voice and that is a significant step, but that further thought should be given to what constitutes “desirable” participation and how beneficiaries are informed of their participation. This idea is explored further in Section 2.3.5, where village level discussion about stories of change is reported.

Participation of boundary partners: I would consider the boundary partners in these projects to be the village health volunteers and the government staff. Village health volunteers did not play any specific role in MSC, though in some cases, stories were collected from them. When I suggested that perhaps these volunteers might become involved with collecting MSC stories (as they are on the ‘inside’ with well established relationships with others in the community and have different insight to changes in their village compared with field staff), the reaction of field staff was mixed. Some thought that their lack of education would make understanding the concept of the story collection too difficult and that they would only report positive stories to make their village look good. Others thought that in the future this might be a good next step, once staff were comfortable with collecting and writing stories, and saw the advantages it would offer, including their understanding of local languages. I did not speak directly to any of the health volunteers to ask how they would feel about participating. Certainly, the time resources required would need to be considered.

In Luangnamtha, a government staff member of that project has been involved in both the training and collection of stories. In Attapeu government staff might be considered both beneficiaries (as the project includes capacity building for government staff) and boundary partners. When I posed questions to field staff about their possible involvement, it was acknowledged that it would have been possible to try and collect stories of change from the government staff, but that they may not tell you the truth and their actions may likely stray from what they tell you. It became clear that the government staff have been challenging to work with on this project, and that trying to add an activity such as MSC, which is not part of the project proposal, would have been difficult. In future, MSC can explicitly be made a part of the project design and this problem may be overcome. When I spoke with one government staff member, he indicated that they did talk informally to villagers but mostly they heard about consequences of their work by chance rather than through a systematic method like MSC.

Participation of Field staff and PMC: Before using MSC, monitoring was limited to technical aspects of the project. Some field staff were responsible for reporting the progress of their work in building water systems to their project director, or the numbers of participants in health education sessions. The project director compiled and passed on this information to management staff in Vientiane. The introduction of MSC therefore radically changed the nature of field staff’s involvement in monitoring and for the first time, gave focus to what the

⁶ Pretty J. (1994) Alternative Systems of Inquiry for a Sustainable Agriculture, IDS Bulletin, Vol 25, No. 2, pp37–48

villagers were doing, thinking and feeling. They feel “more involved and informed” by the “people-focus” of MSC. Even technical staff, who previously would have had little direct involvement with the villagers, feel in touch with the community. Extensive participation was achieved in both collecting stories and attendance at PMC meetings. It should be noted, however, that this participation only took place with requests and deadlines set by management. Although staff clearly enjoyed the process, it was still seen as additional to their normal workload and uncompensated work time. As recommendations and responses to stories were formulated at their PMC meetings, this was an empowering process for field staff, where they felt able to contribute to the project’s design and implementation that would normally be out of their hands.

Participation of ADRA Vientiane: Previously, only those involved in project work played any role in monitoring and evaluation. In addition, the structure of existing monitoring systems appeared quite loose and un-prescribed. With the introduction of MSC, a core group of staff participated on a monthly basis (though some were not always there) and administration and finance staff participated on a rotating basis. Therefore, participation at management level in M&E was certainly increased and given more structure, and has increased awareness for administration staff of what is actually happening in the field.

Participation of ADRA Australia: As donor, usually ADRA Australia’s role regarding monitoring involves certain staff overlooking the systems employed by the partner and the management of the project activities (actual vs. planned). Where possible its role includes time to visit the project and discuss issues with project staff and beneficiaries. ADRA Australia’s involvement in the MSC story selection process therefore represents a different and more diverse participation than usual, as most of the office staff participated in the final selection of stories. The staff at ADRA Australia were very happy to be involved and were open to hearing about unintended change, recognising how much can be learnt from negative changes reported. In future, as mentioned earlier, a more detailed (and therefore transparent) record of the donor’s discussion in selecting changes would be beneficial for ADRA Laos. In addition, stories of change can help inform donors of issues they might like to investigate when they visit projects in the field. The participation of the donor holds an additional importance in terms of validation of the work of field officers. It was clear that the donor’s interest in their stories gave field staff a sense of pride and recognition.

Goal to develop the analytical skills of field staff

The fact that field staff found the initial concept of the MSC system difficult to comprehend reflects their lack of exposure to such thinking and analysis, which is a highly complex process even for experienced researchers. However, it is clear that they had the potential to learn new skills and apply them through this pilot project. The first level of analysis occurs in the field, when stories are collected and written on to the standard story form. As mentioned earlier in the section on efficiency, not all the required skills for this aspect have been developed among all staff members. There still exists confusion about whose voice (the villager or field staff) is to be used, and as indicated earlier, this difficulty is inherent in this sort of interpretative research method. In addition, giving a meaningful reason as to *why* the change is important to the villager and to the staff member remains a challenge to field staff. It is possible that according to local culture, rationalisation or justification is not necessarily a recognised or common way of thinking and communicating.

The involvement of most field staff members in PMC meetings at which stories were discussed and compared clearly facilitated their learning from one another. Allocating stories to different domains has added another dimension to the discussion and made field staff really think about the sort of change they were talking about. According to the project directors, they feel that their field staff now think more about creating changes in villagers’ practices rather than just imparting knowledge and technical information such as number of wells drilled. Additionally, thinking about what actions can be taken in response to a story requires an extra level of analysis, which took place effectively in Luangnamtha and to a lesser extent in Attapeu.

Developing interviewing skills of field staff was not part of the goals of using MSC, but is a prerequisite for sound process and this aspect is one that requires further attention.

The good thing about MSC is that just by continuing to use the system, learning will continue to take place amongst field staff, as each refines and improves their development thinking and analytical and research skills and those skills are transferred from one to another through exposure and discussion at the PMC meetings. In both projects, field staff indicated that they would all like to come to the story selection meetings (not confined to just PMC) and I believe that this is to be encouraged.

Goal to improve ADRA Laos' ability to determine overall impact of projects

The MSC monitoring system certainly contributes to assessment of impact of projects and gives greater insight regarding impact than most traditional monitoring and evaluation methodologies. However, MSC is not designed to “determine overall impact” of the project. I think there is some danger in over-interpreting the information that this system provides to claim “project impact”. Rather, MSC is designed to tell you about particular exceptional stories/events (certain impacts) related to the project and help an organisation's ability to direct the project in a desirable direction.

One important comment made at the evaluation workshop about whether or not this goal had been achieved was that MSC quickly informs you about what impacts are occurring, which means that these impacts (especially negative ones) can then be responded to within the life of the project and this is an important and valid point.

Further data collection and analysis is needed to translate the changes recorded in MSC stories to determine overall impact. Other forms of analysis and impact assessment (for instance health impact assessment and social impact assessment) used together with MSC, have the great potential to assist in determining overall impact of projects. MSC may be useful to help develop meaningful indicators (to beneficiaries, staff and donors) that can be measured on a larger scale to determine overall impact of the project.

As a part of this evaluation, we attempted to trial quantifying some recurring impacts in stories of change related to the Luangnamtha project. In this area, field staff were familiar with the villagers and therefore able to discuss and estimate the extent of certain changes based on their observations. In some cases, they had already collected data quantifying some of the changes reported in MSC stories. The sorts of changes we were able to quantify were actions taken by villagers due to health education activities, such as installing fencing to contain animals, implementing sanitation rules by village leadership committees, use (and lack of use) of newly installed latrines and collection (or not) of household garbage. Table 3 shows the results of this additional quantification and analysis. This quantification exercise is not necessary to undertake at frequent intervals, as in a traditional quantitative/indicator based monitoring system. It might be that in 12 months there are new types of most significant changes that need quantifying to provide insight to overall project effectiveness and impact.

Table 3: Quantification of changes identified in MSC stories and resulting from project health education activities from Luangnamtha region

Village	Fencing installed		Implementation of village sanitation rules				Latrine use ¹ (used latrine/total latrines)	Garbage collection ² (households using/total households)
	for animals (% of households)	for houses (% of households)	Latrine use and fencing animals	Latrine use	Fencing animals	No rules		
PanTong	70	5				*	29/79	70/82
LaVed	90	90				*	48/51	46/47
SopSim	70	-			*		35/37	29/38
Soptout	20	90				*	18/20	20/24
KM 44	90	70	*				34/38	33/41
NamSing	30	70			*		32/52	36/60
NamLoung	90	70			*		2/39	32/46
TalongTauP	50	70				*	21/33	28/36

oune								
Palanh	70	70				*	23/34	26/36
HatNgong	90	70				*	17/19	14/25
DonXai	N/A	60				*	34/45	34/46
HuayHom	Effective village fence	80				*	33/37	39/46
KuaSoon	20	75				*	39/42	47/51
NamKong	70	99				*	29/33	-
KonTou	Mostly effective village fence	50		*			38/75	56/76
PhuLed	Ineffective village fence	50				*	63/70	72/74
PaDeng	Ineffective village fence	90				*	29/51	49/51
SinOudom	Effective village fence	98		*			37/40	32/46

¹ These data are from data collected by the project during December 2003 and January 2004

² These data are from data collected by the project during the pilot project operation time.

This method was effective for particular, easily observable changes, but would be difficult to carry out for less tangible changes. In Attapeu, field staff did not feel able to quantify across different villages how widespread were the changes they had documented. This was most likely due to the project design to which they were working, which does not allow them to work as closely with the communities as did the design of the projects undertaken in Luangnamtha..

Goal to improve ADRA Laos' understanding of how projects are interacting with beneficiaries

It was clear both from a variety of comments made at the evaluation workshop, and by spending time with field staff, that MSC has definitely given insight into what happens after a project activity occurs. Its use has helped ADRA Laos to pay attention to the villagers' perspectives about the project throughout the organisation.

To certain field staff it was a major revelation that expected outcomes did not necessarily occur after working in a village and completing their project activities. For instance, people's behaviour might not actually change though they had been given knowledge through a project educational activity or a completely unexpected outcome might have occurred.

For administration staff in Vientiane, they felt that previously they only knew monthly plans and schedules, but that now they had some idea of how ADRA staff had interacted with villagers and what had taken place for the villagers. Management staff in Vientiane iterated this point, saying that it had given them insight into how project activities are carried out by field staff and increased knowledge of any problems that were occurring.

MSC was seen to give information about external factors affecting the project that might not otherwise have been observed (e.g. taste of the water). Further, it has given a more complete picture of each community and revealed changes that, although not directly related to ADRA's activities, (e.g. opium problems) helps inform ADRA about the community and its needs.

Goal to improve ADRA Laos' project management

It was hoped that the PMC would be able to use information gathered from MSC stories and improve project implementation and thereby the quality of the projects. Both the projects participating in the MSC pilot were flexible and amenable to adjustments based on MSC findings.

As discussed earlier in the efficiency section about implementation of feedback, responses to the MSC changes have sometimes, but not always, been followed up. In Luangnamtha, field staff said they have been able to follow-up negative stories by including particular issues in health education activities. Staff also reported that they have motivated village leadership committees to take action (e.g. on a person not using a latrine). They indicated that some cases were difficult, and where adjustments to the project such as providing additional health education have not had any effect, (e.g. a village where livestock still roam freely). In Attapeu, staff felt that they were able to respond to most negative changes and gave examples of internal conflict in the village, which was discussed with government staff, and to find a solution together, sometimes involving the provincial health department where necessary. Another example given was reducing the number of subjects covered in the health education, as it was clear that villagers were not remembering all the information. As mentioned earlier, documentation shows that in some months the PMC did not actually make recommendations based on the MSC stories, and hence no adjustments to project implementation were made for these sets of stories. In both Luangnamtha and Attapeu, it appeared that ideas about how to capitalise on positive stories have not yet been carried out.

As mentioned earlier, there is a clear need for a systematic way for responses to MSC stories to be followed-up and documented so that field staff are accountable for carrying out the actions both that they recommend at their PMC meetings and that are passed to them from Vientiane's feedback recommendations.

2.3.3 Effectiveness

According to Dart and Davies⁷, the primary purpose of MSC as it was originally conceived was, "to facilitate program improvement by focusing the direction of work towards explicitly valued directions and away from less valued directions". It is therefore a form of organisational learning that, if effective, would be expected to improve the development work of the agency as a whole.

Six months of the pilot MSC system is a very short period in which to try and assess whether or not MSC has helped ADRA Laos to improve the quality of the development aid it provides. However, some of the perceived benefits of using MSC, articulated by both field staff and management staff, clearly indicate a shift in the consciousness of the organisation because MSC monitoring was introduced. Of particular importance is the increased focus on the beneficiaries and their responses and needs, and the realisation that one should not take for granted that project outputs necessarily lead to the desired project outcomes and impacts.

I believe that ADRA Laos can further capitalise on the learning gained from using MSC by taking up some of the recommendations for improvement given in this report and the ideas suggested in Section 2.4.2 for extension of the MSC system. Over the longer term, further analysis of MSC information has the potential to provide valuable input to strategic planning for the organisation and project design that is more closely suited to the communities with which the organisation works. Following these suggestions will, I believe, benefit ADRA Laos' continued use of the MSC monitoring system

2.3.4 Assessment of replicability

Overall, ADRA Laos has developed a sound MSC system that is working well for their particular situation and is certainly a useful starting point for other organisations, which they may adapt and modify according to their own situation. The MSC Guide, written by the intern at ADRA Laos who facilitated the introduction of MSC, will provide a valuable resource to enable other organisations to adopt this monitoring system.

⁷ Dart J.J and Davies R.J. (2003) "A Dialogical, Story-Based Evaluation Tool: The Most Significant Change Technique", *American Journal of Evaluation*, Vol 24, No 2 pp137-156

An assessment of the replicability of ADRA Laos' monitoring system requires comprehending what differences may exist between the contexts, staff, projects and donors of other development agencies and ADRA Laos. I have explored below how differences might affect how MSC is applied elsewhere. I specifically discuss the main barriers encountered by ADRA Laos in implementing their MSC system, as it is likely that some, if not all these barriers will exist for other organisations. Lastly, I have included some comments by ADRA Laos' management staff based on their experience with the pilot project, for agencies thinking about replicating this system.

Differences in context: The context within which an agency works is an important factor in determining how to apply MSC. There were marked differences in the use of MSC and how much it benefited each project in which ADRA Laos applied it, because of the context of each project. The political environment played a part, as did the nature of the communities and their relationship with field staff, and the nature of the project design were all important contextual factors. Strict government control was not conducive to open collection of stories of change and weaker links between staff and villagers reduced the quality of the stories. Projects designed with repeated contact between certain field staff and villagers are more conducive to the use of MSC monitoring.

Differences in staff: For MSC to work well, it is important that there is strong commitment at the management level to use and participate in the MSC monitoring system. Without the commitment of senior staff, success is unlikely. This is particularly true for reporting negative changes. ADRA Laos was supportive of hearing negative changes and encouraged these findings to be revealed. This attitude is imperative if field staff are to feel comfortable reporting changes safely and meaningfully. The level of potential and skills among field staff is also an important factor. In ADRA Laos, there were enough field staff who readily understood MSC to start using the system and help others learn and understand what was required. Obtaining stories in a non-directive fashion is a difficult skill to learn and should not be taken for granted. Analysis of stories at meetings is an important learning process for field staff to learn from one another.

Differences in projects: The size and nature of the project influences how MSC is adapted. Smaller projects may be more amenable to trialling MSC, as long as adequate budget and resources can be supplied. In some projects where boundary partners are highly involved, more so than was the case for ADRA Laos' pilot projects (for instance micro-finance projects), it may be possible for these boundary partners to be involved in story collection. The number of field staff working on a particular project and their existing workload will affect how often stories may be collected.

Differences in donors: both the donor needs in terms of reporting requirements and donor attitude to flexibility in project design are important determinants of how MSC is applied. Some donors are beginning to request qualitative information of impacts from their implementing agencies. MSC can start to help provide information of this nature and can be extended to quantify changes that interest different stakeholders including the donor. If donors are not interested in hearing negative and unexpected changes, using MSC may cause some conflict and confusion as it lies comfortably within a "learning" ethos and less so within a deterministic model of development aid. Projects designed with space for adjustment of project activities based on the monitoring system are more amenable to use of MSC than those that are not. ADRA Laos was fortunate that the projects in which they implemented MSC had some degree of flexibility so that field staff could respond to changes recorded.

Main barriers for ADRA Laos: the three most significant barriers encountered by ADRA Laos in implementing MSC were:

- Initial difficulty in comprehending the concepts involved, particularly by field staff
- Language and translation barriers, both at the village level where field staff did not always speak the minority language of the community and within the organisation to translate stories from Lao to English
- The perception at all levels that introducing MSC is adding more work.

Comments by ADRA Laos' management staff: Based on lessons they have learnt from using MSC, management staff of ADRA Laos gave good suggestions for other organisations to think about if they plan to implement MSC. Firstly, to try it as a small-scale pilot rather than forcing it into existing projects for which it has not been accounted or budgeted. Staff

felt that the benefits of using MSC need to be experienced to be understood and valued and that a small manageable scale would facilitate the learning and experience of the potential benefits. If additional funding was available, it could be added to an existing project. Secondly, they suggested trialling its use in smaller rather than larger projects, which are harder to re-align and change part way through the project. Thirdly, since MSC is an adaptable system and has been applied in different ways by different people in different contexts, it was felt that other organisations should investigate how others have used MSC, not just ADRA Laos, before attempting to develop their own system. Lastly, they cautioned that MSC is not a simple system to understand or introduce, and that at least some senior staff members with a good grasp of English need to be involved in designing the MSC system to be used and in facilitating its introduction to local staff.

2.3.5 Village level assessment of significance of changes

A concern noted by many people who have come across the MSC methodology, was the hierarchical approach of story selection. Potentially, the significance of changes at the village level might be lost in the selection process and priority given instead to changes selected by stakeholders far removed from the village situation. Clearly, different values are in play for different stakeholders in the selection process. I thought it would be interesting to use some



Figure 8: Expressing why reduced labour for women is important

time in the villages to observe whether a focus group approach to discussing significant changes might shed light on this. That is, whether the focus groups gave importance to the same changes deemed significant by staff at the field, management and donor levels, and to test if this was a useful or effective way to increase villagers' participation and engagement in MSC. this process of village level inquiry could be another part of the MSC verification procedures. In some ways this process of village level inquiry could form another part of MSC verification procedures. In this process rather than checking the facts of a particular story, I was investigating how village level criteria of value compared to field staff, management staff

and donor agency criteria of value. In cases where they do differ, this needs to inform all participant's judgements in the next round of MSC identification and selection.

The findings are very interesting. Tables 4 and 5 show the priority in terms of significance and reasons given for changes discussed at three Luangnamtha villages and three Attapeu villages.

Table 4: Significant changes as determined by groups in Luangnamtha villages

Village name	BanSoptout	DonXai	KM 44
			
Make-up of group present	Whole village, men and women	Mostly men with young children, a few women, part of village	Mostly men (perhaps 2/3) of group, part of village

Priority given to different positive changes found in stories recorded in these villages	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reduced time and labour for women since water is accessible 2. New good habits of washing utensils thoroughly 3. Using water to grow additional vegetables for income generation. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Boiling water before drinking 2. Reduced time and labour for women 3. Using a mosquito net for protection from malaria 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using a garbage basket to clear away garbage 2. Reduced number of dysentery cases due to clean water and habits 3. Sanitary rules for the village where people are fined if they don't comply
Reasons for choosing the most significant positive change	Women have more time for agriculture and income generating activities (handicrafts)	Drinking boiled water keeps you healthy, avoids diarrhea	If remove rubbish then later the disease will be reduced (mostly voted for by men. Women mostly voted for dysentery story)
Priority given to negative changes found in stories recorded in these villages	-	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not using latrine, drinking 2. Drinking unboiled water 	-
Reasons for choosing the most significant negative change	-	Not using latrine affects the health of others whereas unboiled water only affects the person who acts in this way.	-

Table 5: Significant changes as determined by groups in Attapeu villages

Village name	BanFengdeng	BanMixai	BanThatSaengDeng
			
Make-up of group present	Group of about 15 women	Group of about 7 women	Men and women, part of the village
Priority given to different positive changes (hypothetical changes, observed in stories from Attapeu)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reduced labour for women as river is difficult to access 2. Having access to clean safe water 3. Growing more vegetables 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reduced time and labour for women, 2. Having access to clean safe water, 3. Growing more vegetables 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reduced time and labour for women (women's vote), Having access to clean water (men's vote) 2. Growing more vegetables

<p>Reasons for choosing the most significant positive change</p>	<p>Before women and children had to get water, now anyone is able to get water very easily. Can take a bath at any time of day now. Don't use well water for growing vegetables; use river water. Taste isn't so bad and if start drinking when young will be used to it.</p>	<p>Women now have more time for other things such as getting firewood.</p>	<p>Women's reason was that it gave them time for other things such as collecting firewood and field work. Men's reason was that clean water helps reduce disease especially diarrhoea.</p>
<p>Priority given for most significant negative change (observed in stories from Attapeu generally)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Queuing for water 2. Bad taste of the well water 3. Inadequate care of drainage at the well, stagnant water 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Queuing for water 2. Bad taste of the well water 3. Inadequate care of drainage at the well, stagnant water 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Queuing for water 2. Bad taste of the well water 3. Inadequate care of drainage at the well, stagnant water
<p>Reasons for choosing the most significant negative change</p>	<p>The main problem is waiting in the queue for water – about 18 households use one bore. Drainage isn't much of a problem; educate children not to leave plastic bags etc. around the bore.</p>	<p>Have to wait 20–30 minutes to queue for water, need a sunshade for the bore as have to wait under nearby houses. Also, some children fighting to get water first. Bad taste isn't so bad, get used to it.</p>	<p>Queue is the biggest problem, need to wait 20–30 mins, children arguing and maybe families will fight in future, only one bore out of three is good, so long queue there. Need more bores.</p>

Three aspects of these findings are worth drawing attention to. Firstly, it was clear that the gender make-up of the group strongly affected the decision about which change was most significant. This was important both in terms of differences in valuing different changes and in terms of the dynamics of the discussion that took place. In some villages, men and women were able to engage in a debate, seemingly on equal ground, each expressing their point of view. In other villages, this did not take place and women were reticent about expressing their point of view if it was different to that expressed by the men. In future, in these cases, it would be better to conduct discussions with men and women separately.

The second interesting point regards KM 44, in which two of the stories discussed were also those stories discussed in Australia. In Australia, the story about dysentery was selected in the health domain, with the reason given that: "Can clearly see the impact of health education and a local understanding of the concepts promoted. Exciting to see the diffusion of this impact to the broader community — she talks about it openly with friends." The garbage basket story was in the behaviour domain and was not selected in Australia. At KM 44, mostly men voted for the story about the use of garbage, as early in the discussion the headman expressed this to be his point of view. Many women, in the background, voted for the dysentery story but were outnumbered and therefore outvoted.

The third point worth noting is the fact that villagers in four cases (where the women's point of view dominated) chose reduced time and labour of women as the most significant change, even when this choice had to be made over access to clean, safe water. Therefore, while donors may believe that clean safe water is of primary importance based on the causal relationship between clean water and health, the point of view of villagers is different.

2.4 Recommendations

In this section, both improvements to the existing MSC system are suggested, and some possible beneficial extensions of the MSC are given.

2.4.1 Improving the existing MSC system

In the sections on efficiency and efficacy of MSC, recommendations for changes and improvements have been made with justification and reasons given. Additionally, where decisions need to be made, advantages and disadvantages of different choices were discussed. In this section, they are summarised briefly to facilitate actions to be taken.

Continued commitment

- Responsibility for managing the MSC system given to one person who has sufficient time resources to give this activity priority.
- Continued commitment of senior ADRA Laos staff is imperative for survival and integrity of the system.
- Decide upon the length of the period during which the newly devised on-going MSC system is to be implemented and set a date for reflection and review of the system to assess any further changes necessary.
- Discuss the goals suggested in the evaluation workshop for an on-going MSC system for ADRA Laos so that its purpose is clear and it can be evaluated against goals in the future. The suggested goals were: to make MSC part of regular project activities, to improve project implementation, to have information about the progress of project activities based on the proposal, to improve the relationship between the villagers and project staff/government staff and to involve stakeholders in monitoring (government, project staff, villagers, donors).
- Decide if other projects (e.g. SPICE) are going to implement MSC and if so, plan for training and introduction of the method to field staff.

Decisions on aspects of an on-going system

- Decide on reporting period (one, two or three months).
- Decide between using two domains, positive (or open) and negative, and using some project specific domains.
- Decide upon a suitable selection process (including how many stories of different domains at each level and how often the selection process occurs).
- Decide upon any necessary verification processes, perhaps built in to monthly visits by team leaders.
- Decide on the best method of storage of MSC stories and whether or not all stories or only selected stories are stored.

Training and communication

- Arrange on-going training in MSC for field staff, perhaps at an interval of once or twice a year, particularly focused on research skills (including interviewing techniques, documentation of stories and interpretation of villagers' and their own views, analysis, etc.). A useful learning activity might be to record some interview conversations between staff and villagers and directly translate these into English by someone proficient in both languages so that better guidance may be given.
- Provide additional information about what ADRA Laos desires in terms of participation and feedback from the donor ADRA Australia, perhaps asking for more detailed feedback regarding the stories and the choices made.

Story collection

- Give thought to the best way of ensuring that all villages are covered, and that sub-groups of the village population are represented in the stories collected, or at least that one person for each project is given responsibility to monitor the types of villagers interviewed and which villages have been covered each month.
- Discuss the matter of whether the same villager is interviewed a second time to follow-up a change.
- Encourage staff to write more detailed, personalised stories, particular to the situation of the villager interviewed.
- Discuss the ethics issue of privacy of information and decide what is the best approach to adopt to informing (or not) villagers about their participation in MSC and protecting their identity.
- Discuss whether repeated story themes should be reported regardless, or avoided, or reported separately. For instance at a PMC meeting where stories are discussed, record the frequency of recurrence.
- Ensure that staff members who speak the ethnic minority languages go to the villages where communication in Lao is a problem and make sure stories are still collected in these villages (or for individuals in these village, e.g. women) and that they are not omitted because it is seen as “too hard”.
- Give further thought to what constitutes ‘desirable’ participation in MSC for beneficiaries.
- Consider use of boundary partners participating in story collection and what training this might entail.
- Consider potential for greater involvement of government staff in MSC, either in terms of collecting stories about them where they are ‘beneficiaries’ of the project, or involving them in story collection as a capacity building and learning process for them.
- Ensure continued participation by all field staff takes place, remembering that during the pilot project this participation only took place with requests and deadlines set by the intern.

Selection of stories

- In both projects, field staff indicated that they would all like to come to the story selection meetings (not confined to just PMC) and I believe that this is to be encouraged.
- Revisit in the future the decision taken to only collect stories by interview (and not observation) that was made to simplify this issue for staff. Stories by observation are a valuable method by which to collect stories of change.

Translation

- It is imperative that a solution is found to the problem of translation, including both upgrading the language skills of field staff and encouraging those with some English knowledge to write stories in English and arrange additional external help for translation.

Feedback

- Ensure that project directors’ translate and communicate feedback from ADRA Vientiane to all field staff.
- Thought should be given to what greater level of feedback might be useful from ADRA Australia, perhaps by capturing more of the discussion that took place and referring to reasons that stories were selected at PMC and Vientiane, or why that story was selected over another.
- There is a clear need for a systematic way for responses to MSC stories to be followed-up and documented so that field staff are accountable for carrying out the actions they recommend at their PMC meetings and which are passed to them from Vientiane’s

feedback recommendations. A useful suggestion at the evaluation workshop was for an on-going log of actions and their status, as being either in progress, not yet attempted, or completed. This, or another system, is essential for MSC to actually help improve project management.

Input to strategic planning and project design

- Give thought to future project design based on lessons learnt in this pilot project. MSC requires a certain level of trust and relationships to be built between field staff and villagers and therefore has implications for project design. Projects that facilitate regular interaction between villagers and staff and are of a community development nature are more likely to work well in tandem with this monitoring system.

2.4.2 Extending ADRA Laos' MSC system

There are diverse suggestions made here for ways of extending ADRA Laos' MSC system based on other organisations' experiences with MSC and potential extensions of this monitoring methodology. I was able to 'taste-test' some of these ideas during the evaluation to see how they might apply, to see the reaction they provoked in staff and determine whether others thought that they might be of value to ADRA Laos. Below are those that hold significant potential to benefit ADRA Laos, but of course each represents yet another investment in time and energy and may or may not be feasible. The possibilities include quantification of certain significant changes, integration with other monitoring systems, "en masse" analysis of information and extension of participation at the village level.

Quantification of significant changes: In the original project proposal by ADRA Laos for this pilot project, one aim was to help find a way to assess and communicate effectiveness of the programs. As mentioned earlier, although MSC has the potential to reveal "impact" of a project, it only does so with regard to particular and indeed exceptional cases. The explicit search for a "significant change" means that this change is not necessarily at all representative of the average experience of beneficiaries in terms of the impact of the project. However, stories of change may be a useful way to develop meaningful indicators of valued change that may be quantified as part of a project evaluation, either formative or summative, depending on the nature of the change. As demonstrated in the section on efficacy, during this evaluation I attempted to introduce the idea of quantifying certain changes that had surfaced in MSC stories with field staff in Luangnamtha. We found that it was indeed possible to generate a wealth of information that may refine and give weight to assessment of project outcomes and impacts than an individual MSC story is able to do. Attention to systematic selection of a sample and other important aspects of quantitative research methodologies are important for such analysis.

Integration with other monitoring systems: It would appear that in the past, ADRA Laos' monitoring systems have worked within quite a loose structure. There exists great potential to use MSC generated information to inform and direct monitoring of the project. I believe the most important aspect to this is that all negative changes (or both selected and not selected stories) are compiled at the PMC level and this information forwarded to management staff. Actions to follow-up these negative changes can then be taken up either through direct recommendations back to the PMC, or when management staff visit in the field. In this way, important information is not lost and monitoring trips will be given greater purpose.

En masse analysis of information: Information generated by MSC stories may be analysed in ways other than the story selection process. The most obvious of these, is to consider a large collection of stories and identify the major themes across these stories and their recurrence. Such analysis will give valuable input to long term strategic planning processes for ADRA Laos. I believe that such an analysis on a yearly basis would be beneficial.

Extension of participation at the village level: There are two aspects that I would suggest to consider in modifying how villagers participate in MSC monitoring. The first is to consider whether to use workshop groups conducted by field staff (particularly in villages where Lao is the predominant language and where field staff are familiar with the villagers), to produce and discuss significant change stories. I believe that there is great value in increasing the level of engagement of villagers with the changes happening to them, both for their own learning and for increasing field staff understanding of the communities as whole entities including the dynamics that take place. These would need to be culturally appropriate and take into account

power structures such as gender relations. The second suggestion is that field staff specifically make an effort to talk to villagers unsupportive of ADRA's activities in the village. This is a big ask of field staff and is likely to be somewhat difficult for them. They would potentially need training to do this due to the likelihood of conflict. However, it might be a fruitful way to identify negative changes, unexpected contextual and personal factors and gain insight into how ADRA best interacts with Lao communities. When I tested this idea during the evaluation workshop with the participants, many replied that they thought that this was an important thing to do. Some field staff said it would be hard to identify such people, and others said it would be easy; for instance to target people who never come to health education sessions, identified with the help of villagers who do attend.

3 CONCLUSION

The innovative, qualitative, participatory, monitoring system 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) evaluated here has had a significant impact on ADRA Laos, and with refinements, is likely to continue to promote organisational learning and therefore ADRA Laos' development work.

MSC is not a prescribed methodology, but an evolving one, which needs to be adapted to suit the context in which it operates. The lessons this evaluation captures are available for other ADRA agencies if they wish to implement this monitoring system in their projects.

The evaluation took a qualitative and participatory approach, seeking insight both into what the monitoring system has to offer, and the sensitivities and complexities associated with its use. The findings of the evaluation are that the three criteria of efficiency, efficacy and effectiveness were all met to some degree.

The benefits gained were considered well worth the time invested and the MSC system was successfully developed and implemented, but there is more to be done in the areas of story collection methods and giving greater attention to feedback mechanisms. Ethical issues were raised about the practice of not informing villagers of their participation in MSC.

MSC was found to be efficacious in that it satisfied most of ADRA Laos's goals for using this monitoring system. To improve ADRA Laos' ability to determine the overall impact of projects however, it is suggested that other impact assessment and evaluative methods also need to be employed.

Evaluating effectiveness after such a short period, in a pilot program is difficult, but, clearly, a significant shift has occurred in the thinking of staff at all levels of the organisation about development and what it means to do development work. This augers well for the ability of MSC to help ADRA Laos improve the quality of its development activities.

The continued success of MSC as an on-going monitoring system for ADRA Laos rests upon the implementation of the recommendations here and a continuing commitment throughout the organisation to learning via using this system. Implementing the suggested extensions to the MSC system would further enable ADRA Laos to capitalise on existing information and to involve beneficiaries in a way that promotes their thinking and development.

APPENDIX A

ADRA Laos MSC Pilot Project Story of Change

Domain:	CHANGES IN PEOPLE'S HEALTH
Villager or Observation:	Story reported through interview with villagers.
Project:	Project W
Person reporting:	Field staff member X
Date of report (Day/Month/Year):	March 2004
Name of Village and Name of District:	Village Y
What is your name? (Mr./Mrs. first name and family name)	Mrs. Z
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 the VILLAGER (person in story)?	"Because my family and I are healthy and don't get sick anymore. I don't have excrement around my 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:	Mrs. Z's health has improved, and she also has knowledge of hygiene and practises 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: (Only for one story selected in each domain)	Can clearly see the impact of health education and a local understanding of the concepts promoted. Exciting to see the diffusion of this impact to the broader community; she talks about it openly with friends.

ADRA Laos MSC Pilot Project**Story of Change**

Domain:	CHANGES IN PEOPLE'S BEHAVIOUR
Villager or Observation:	Story reported through observation of field staff
Project:	Project J
Person reporting:	Field staff member K
Date of report (Day/Month/Year):	March 2004
Name of Village and Name of District:	Village L
What is your name? (Mr./Mrs. first name and family name)	Mrs. M
How old are you?	35 years old
Basic idea of change:	There is a garbage basket.
WHAT happened?	There is a garbage basket for storing the garbage inside the house.
WHEN did the change happen? (give a specific month)	December 2003
Details of the change: (HOW and WHY did the change happen?)	In the past, I went to work in this village. I saw the left-over food, plastic bags, and fish under their house and around their house which caused dirtiness and a bad smell. People didn't want to walk to that place. Now, she has a garbage basket in her house for storing the garbage. Then she takes it to a safe place for the garbage. The garbage basket keeps the flies from coming and there is no bad smell. The garbage doesn't fly around when the wind comes. The ground and house are clean. There is no place for diseases to breed. This can also reduce the sickness rate.
How did ADRA help with this change?	ADRA gave health education: The 3 Cleans: live, eat, and drink clean. The project selects families that follow the 3 Cleans and distributes flags to them. To have a garbage basket in the house is one of the criteria for selecting 3 Clean families.
<i>Only for stories from villagers.</i>	Not applicable.
Why is this change important to the VILLAGER (person in story)?	
As a project staff member, why is this change important to you? Is it positive or negative?	This is a positive change, because it can prevent dirtiness in the house and in village areas. It builds up good behaviour for them to keep the garbage basket. And it gives a good example for other families and for generations in the future. It also can reduce the breeding of diseases.
PMC reason for selection:	We can see that Mrs. M had a good change because she has a garbage basket in her house. The garbage is a place for diseases to be borne, and it also causes a bad smell, and the environment to look ugly. We need to promote this example to other families.
Vientiane Committee reason for selection:	We chose this story because what can be perceived as a small change – using a garbage basket – can actually make a significant difference in the cleanliness of the village. In the MSC monitoring

	<p>difference in the cleanliness of the village. In the MSC monitoring system, this is the first story we've received about a garbage basket. It's also a very well-written story.</p>
<p>ADRA Australia reason for selection: <i>(Only for one story selected in each domain)</i></p>	<p>Not selected at this level</p>

ADRA Laos MSC Pilot Project**Story of Change**

Domain:	NEGATIVE CHANGE
Villager or Observation:	Story reported by interview with villager.
Person reporting:	Field staff member P
Project:	Project Q
Date of report (Day/Month/Year):	March 04
Name of Village and Name of District:	Village R
What is your name? (Mr./Mrs. first name and family name)	Mr. S
How old are you?	38 years old
Basic idea of change:	No use of Gravity Fed System (GFS) water for consumption
WHAT happened?	Limestone appears in kettle after boiling
WHEN did the change happen? (give a specific month)	Since 2002
Details of the change: (HOW and WHY did the change happen?)	“The GFS water is enough for the use of the village. But some limestone appears in the pots or kettles after boiling water. This problem has discouraged people to use the GFS water for drinking. At present, they just use it for bathing and washing. And use water from streams or hand-dug wells for drinking instead.”
How did ADRA help with this change?	ADRA has provided GFS and latrines to improve the primary health care of the people in this village but there’s negative change in water quality.
<i>Only for stories from villagers.</i> Why is this change important to the VILLAGER (person in story)?	This change is important because drinking raw water might cause urinary stones to many people and could affect ADRA in the future.
As a project staff member, why is this change important to you? Is it positive or negative?	It’s a negative change, and very important to me as a staff member because the GFS water was provided by ADRA and health education. We have to make sure that they use water in the appropriate way.
PMC reason for selection:	We’ve selected this story because it contains both positive and negative changes. Negative is the people didn’t use water for consumption because water contains limestone. Positive is people know about the limestone’s bad effect on their health when they consume it. Therefore, they are using water from the other stream instead.
Vientiane Committee reason for selection:	We felt this story was very significant because it shows a misunderstanding of both villagers and PMC on issues related to water quality. As long as water is boiled before drinking, limestone in water does not affect health. This is not a negative change, but an absence of a positive change in the village since the people are not drinking water from the GFS system.

ADRA Australia reason for selection: <i>(Only for one story selected in each domain)</i>	Not selected
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ADRA Laos MSC Pilot Project**Story of Change**

Domain:	CHANGES IN ANY OTHER AREA (OPEN)
Villager or Observation:	Story reported through interview with villager.
Project:	Project A
Person reporting:	Field staff member B
Date of report (Day/Month/Year):	February 2004
Name of Village and Name of District:	Village C
What is your name? (Mr./Mrs. first name and family name)	Mr. D
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 diarrhoea. 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 headman 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.
<i>Only for stories from villagers.</i> Why is this change important to the VILLAGER (person in story)?	No answer.
As a project staff member, why is this change important to you? Is it positive or negative?	This change is very important. To make villagers become familiar with new things, we try to change their old behaviour to be new behaviour 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.
PMC reason for selection:	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 faecal matter everywhere.
Vientiane Committee reason for selection:	We felt this story was significant because it describes the barriers to behaviour 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 behaviour. ADRA has

	<p>convinced Mr. C that using latrines is a good idea, but he has not put this into action.</p>
<p>ADRA Australia reason for selection: <i>(Only for one story selected in each domain)</i></p>	<p>Group felt that this example provided more opportunity for learning through what was done wrong, rather than what was done right. The 50yo would be a man of considerable influence in the village, and although the village was fining him for his error, he would be sending mixed messages to the rest of the community.</p>