Most Significant Change (MSC)

Collecting significant change and impact stories in an authentic way

A form of qualitative, participatory monitoring and evaluation

MSC is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. It is participatory because many project stakeholders are involved both in deciding the sorts of change to be recorded and in analysing the data. It can be used to help understand the impact of the design project on individuals in quite an authentic and powerful manner.

MSC was invented by Rick Davies; Jess Dart later tested and adapted for an Australian context, and together, they coined the name and wrote the User Guide in 2005.

Based on first-person narratives

The answers to the central question about change are often in the form of stories of who did what, when and why – and the reasons why the event was important. These are based on first person narratives. Stories are collected from those most directly involved, such as participants and field staff. The stories are collected by asking a simple question such as: '*During the last month, in your opinion, what was the most significant change that took place for participants in the program*?' It is initially up to respondents to allocate their stories to a domain category. In addition to this, respondents are encouraged to report why they consider a particular change to be the most significant one.

'Barebones' of MSC

- Define the purpose of using MSC in your context
- Collect stories of change
- Review and select stories
- Feedback and communicate the results
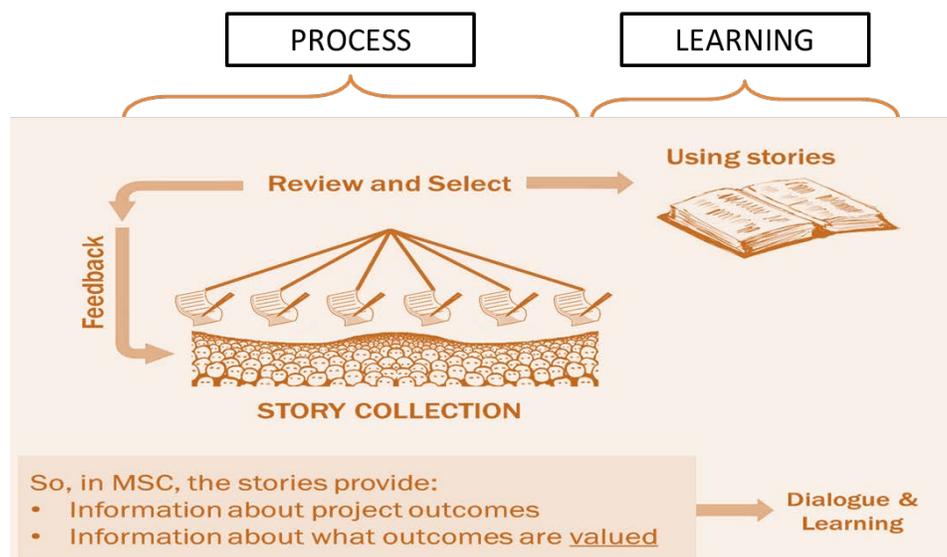- Learning and analysis

Figure 1: The barebones of MSC

Tools for evaluating complexity: MSC

Why the selection of stories is key to MSC

- It ensures people really read the stories
- It's a technique to get people to enter into deeper level of dialogue
- Though it puts people out of their comfort zone and people might not necessarily like to prioritise one story over another, it's not about the choice -- it's about the dialogue, and about surfacing values

How to select

The selection process invariably begins with reading some or all of the stories either out loud or individually. We tend to prefer reading the stories aloud, as it brings the stories to life, but the effectiveness and practicality of this may depend on the context. If the stories have already been sorted into different categories, then all the stories from one category are considered together. A similar question to the collection process is used by those who read the stories:

"From among all these significant changes, what do you think was the most significant change of all?" AND *"Why do you think this is significant?"*

Various facilitated and un-facilitated processes can be used to help groups choose the most significant story.
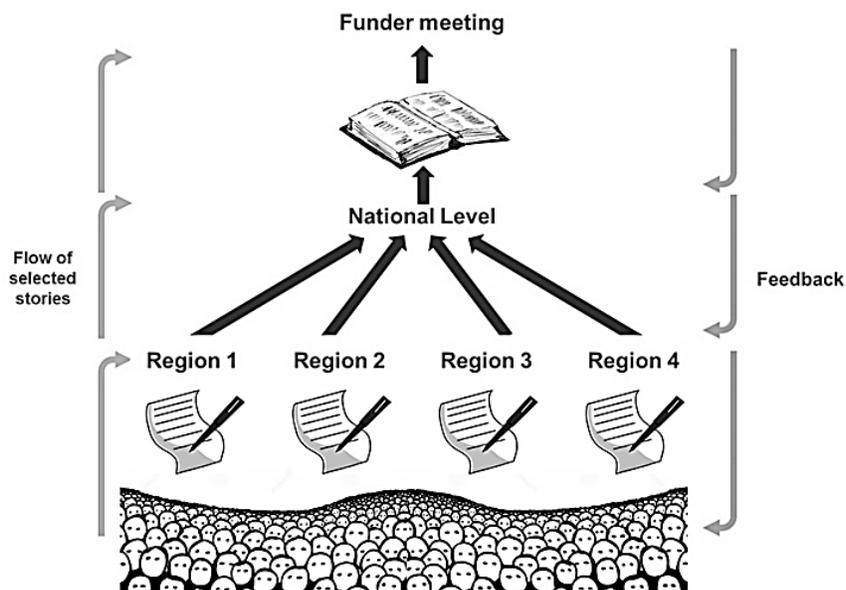

Figure 2: Example MSC selection process

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Documenting the reasons for selection

The reasons for selecting a significant change (SC) story as the most significant should be documented and attached to the story. Because documenting the reasons for selection is usually the last task in a selection meeting, there is a risk that this will be done too hastily and that what is written will not do justice to the depth of discussion or the quality of the judgments made. Explanations should be more than a few key words, such as 'more sustainable' or 'gender equity'. Full sentences should be used to express what was seen as significant in the selected SC story. If multiple criteria were used to justify the selection of a story, these should be listed along with an explanation of their relative importance.

Discussion and analysis of stories

Once the selection process has been completed, it is often good to stand back and think about what the stories collectively tell us. Although systematic content analysis of the full set of documented SC stories is an optional, additional step, experience has shown that reflecting on the content of the story during regular selection meetings provides an excellent opportunity to incorporate learning into ongoing project activities.

User Guide: http://www.clearhorizon.com.au/all-blog-posts/msc-user-guide.aspx

Example MSC story collection guide

Background

My name is _____; I am from _____ and I am working on the _____ project. I am hoping to talk with you about your experiences with [insert relevant topic here] and about any changes that may have resulted from your involvement in it. We are interested in your views, both positive and negative. If you agree, I will ask you 3 or 4 questions and record your answers. I will go over what I have written at the end to make sure you are happy with it.

We hope to use the stories and information collected from your interviews for a number of purposes including:

- to help us understand what participants think is good and not so good
- to make improvements to our work
- to tell our funders what has been achieved.

Contact details

Name of storyteller * _____

Name of person recording story _____

Location _____

Date of recording _____

(If they wish to remain anonymous, don't record their name or contact details – just write '"community member" or some similar description). Remember to ask the participants to sign the consent form at the end if they agree with what has been written, and then staple it to this form.

Questions

Start with some ice breakers if you can.

1. Tell me a little about yourself and how you came to be involved in this project

_____

_____

_____

_____

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2. Please list any changes that you feel have resulted from being involved in the project - they can be big or small, about you or about others.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. We have been talking about a number of changes (refer to list above), from your point of view, which do you think is the *MOST* important change. Please try to describe this change in the form of a story *{if you are using an audio recorder turn it on here}*.

Beginning (situation before the change)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Middle (what happened?)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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End (situation after)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. Why did you choose this change in particular? E.g. **Why was it significant for you**?

_____

_____

_____

_____

Confidentiality (use consent form and ask participants to sign at end if they agree)

We may like to use your stories for reporting to our donors, or sharing with other participants and trainers: Do you (the storyteller):

- want to have your name on the story (tick one)   Yes ❑ No ❑
- consent to us using your story for publication (tick one)   Yes ❑ No ❑

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