MSC: misconceptions, strengths and challenges

Author: <u>Fiona Kotvojs,</u> Carolina Lasambouw

Presenter: Fiona Kotvojs

Abstract

This paper presents the lessons learnt in the application of the Most Significant Change (MSC) method as part of a broader evaluation plans for three different programs funded by the Australian Government in Fiji, Indonesia and Solomon Islands. MSC is a participatory, qualitative evaluation method developed by Davies and Dart (2005). It is becoming a popular method for collecting and analyzing data on the impact of development assistance programs, however often misunderstood and poorly applied. Where it is correctly applied, the full benefits are often not gained because of use of only part of the available data, lack of feedback to stakeholders, or applying it as a 'one-off' event. This paper presents the approach to data collection, management, analysis and dissemination of findings on these three Programs. It discusses how the full depth of data collected can be used and the value in doing this. We identify situations in which MSC should not be used and shows how well applied, MSC can be a valuable part of an evaluation program.

Introduction

Most Significant Change (MSC) is a participatory, qualitative evaluation method developed in 1995 by Davies and popularised by Davies and Dart (2005). It provides information which can be used to identify impacts of the initiative and for learning (such as improving implementation, and identifying and addressing negative or unexpected outcomes). This supports change within an organisation. MSC is becoming a popular method for collecting and analysing data on the impact of development assistance programs, however it is often misunderstood and poorly applied as a monitoring and evaluation method.

Implementation of evaluation is typically considered to involve: data collection, management, analysis and reporting (Owen & Rogers, 1999). In MSC, data is collected by asking stakeholders to identify positive or negative changes as a result of the initiative. From this, the stakeholder selects the one that was most significant and provided details about this in the form of a story. They also explain why this was the most significant change from their perspective. This can be recorded in a variety of media, writing and video being the most common.

The data can be managed in a range of ways. In my experience, it is often as a series of word or video files for each individual story, or paper records of the story filed in folders. In other cases it is entered into a database.

The analysis is conducted by a stakeholder panel who consider these stories. The panel usually comprises those you want to set the direction of the change or support the changes. This panel then selects the one or two that, in their opinion, reflect the MSC as a result of introducing the initiative. They discuss these and identify why they selected this story from all of those considered. The selected stories are then validated.

Reporting is through feedback to stakeholders, up and down the hierarchy and including those stakeholder groups from whom the stories were collected. Reporting includes the

selected story(ies), why it was selected and the lessons learnt from across all the stories considered by the panel. The results may also be included in reports to donors.

This sequence is repeated at regular intervals over the life of the initiative. The stories from panels can then be considered by 'higher' level panels. Selection, validation and reporting occurs in the same way at these higher levels.

As explained in Dart and Davies (2005), MSC is "monitoring because it occurs throughout the program cycle and provides information to help people manage the program. It contributes to evaluation because it provides data on impact and outcomes that can be used to help assess the performance of the program as a whole." In addition, the analysis and feedback process supports change across all stakeholders who participate in the process.

MSC on the Three Programs

The three Programs discussed in this paper are the Fiji Education Sector Program (FESP), the Indonesia Australia Specialised Training Program (IASTP III) and the Community Sector Program (CSP) in Solomon Islands. All are funded by the Australian Government, FESP is managed by Cardno Acil and IASTP III and CSP by GHD-Hassall. While all three Programs are large, each has different characteristics:

- FESP has supported the Fiji Ministry of Education implement their Strategic Plan from May 2003 to December 2009. Its focus is on the strengthening of the institution. Its support on four areas within the Ministry.

- IASTP III is a specialist training Program providing specialist training across many government agencies in Indonesia and also training to support other programs. Over its life (April 2004 to December 2008) it has trained almost 14,000 people from 2,100 agencies.

- CSP is supporting development at a community level in the post conflict environment in Solomon Islands. It is skilling communities in planning and managing activities to meet their development needs, funding activities at a community level to address priority development needs, and building the capacity of community sector organisation.

Each Program has a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan, MSC being only one part of that plan. Other methods used vary between Programs but include: quantitative data from pre and post tests, surveys and statistics collected by agencies; and qualitative data collected through individual and group interviews, focus groups, surveys and World Café. In each case, MSC was used to provide information to support the evaluation of program impact.

MSC was chosen as one of the methods for evaluation for several reasons. On each Program, the client requested MSC be used. While this was often due to misunderstandings about MSC, MSC was implemented as it also met other needs of the evaluation. The evaluation wanted to:

- Determine the impact of the support.
- Use qualitative methods rather than quantitative (in one case we also used quantitative methods at the impact level).
- Use a method which would elicit impacts which we may not have anticipated.
- Use a method which would be appropriate in an oral culture (for two of the Programs).

MSC met these criteria and was therefore adopted as one of the evaluation methods.

The approach to implementation of MSC was fairly consistent on all three Programs. The differences are as follows:

- FESP: MSC was applied over a 12 month period in 2005 as a trial so that the Ministry could decide if they wanted to incorporate it as part of their evaluation program. It was applied to help evaluate two specific areas of support, support to build capacity in leadership and management and trialling enterprise education. The capacity of Ministry staff was built and they ran the MSC process. There were three rounds of MSC during the year. Many of the stories collected have been lost to history. The only analysis that occurred was that undertaken by the selection panel. At the end of the year a decision was made that while it had been a very positive experience the Ministry would not adopt MSC. As a result it was not continued.

- In 2009, MSC was applied to collect data on the impact of support to business processes, early childhood education and leadership and management. In this case, FESP employed a member of the Ministry's staff to collect all the stories and facilitate the process with the support of an adviser. Only one round of story collection and selection was undertaken in three of the four Divisions. All data was entered into a database. Analysis included that undertaken by the selection panel and subsequent analysis of changes identified. The reason for the different approach is discussed below.

- IASTP III: MSC was only applied over the last year of the Program. It was applied to collect data on the impact of all training. Initially selected personal at a Provincial level were trained to collect stories. This approach was not particularly successful. A group of journalist were then trained to collect stories. This was even less successful. Ultimately the Coordinator collected many of stories, supplemented by those collected by personnel at a Provincial level. All data was entered into a database. Analysis included that undertaken by the selection panel, limited analysis of changes identified, and analysis of selection panel feedback.

- CSP: MSC was only applied over the last year of the Program. A capacity building approach was taken. Almost 30 provincial level staff were trained in collection of stories (most of whom already had good facilitation skills) and over 10 in facilitation of selection panels. Stories were collected on each of the three key program objectives to determine impact. The wording of questions explicitly sought positive and negative changes. All data was entered into a database.

- A staff member at the provincial level facilitated the selection panel. Support was provided to the facilitator by a trainer for the first one or two selection panels. Participation in selection panels was maximised to build the capacity of community sector organisations in MSC. This was because a number of these organisations were considering adopting this as part of their approach to evaluation. Analysis included the changes identified and selection panel feedback in addition to that undertaken by the selection panel.

Misunderstandings about MSC

The first challenge in applying MSC on these Programs overcoming misunderstandings in relation to MSC. For two of these Programs there was a perception that MSC would replace M&E on the Program rather than be part of a broader M&E Plan. On the third Program it was thought that because contribution analysis was being used, MSC had to be applied (Kotvojs and Shrimpton, 2007). It is important to recognise that MSC is just one method for collecting and analysing data. There are other methods which can be

used and may be more effective in a particular situation. The evaluator must consider which method is appropriate given the purpose of the evaluation and then use the appropriate method, not what is either 'fashionable' or their preferred approach.

While not initially articulated, discussions with donors and team members indicated that they hadn't realised that MSC captures extreme cases. This is inherent in the methodology. MSC does not capture the 'average' case. Once this was realised, some key users of the evaluation raised concerns as to whether a focus on extreme cases rather than 'typical' result was appropriate.

In each case this concern was addressed in two ways. The first was showing where MSC fitted in as part of a broader M&E Plan. This Plan did capture 'typical' outcomes through other methodologies. The second approach was to explain the reason why extreme cases provided valuable data for the evaluation.

In discussions with others, there are a number of other misunderstandings that seem prevalent – however were not experienced on these three Programs. These are that evaluation using MSC:

- Uses only the story identified as the most significant change. The other data collected can not be used.
- Is easy and requires little knowledge or effort to implement.
- It is undertaken at the end, rather than over, the life of the program.

Experience Implementing MSC

Data Collection:

Stories were collected on all projects through an interview process in which the story collector recorded the story on a template. The template helped facilitate capture of a 'full' story – one which identified the situation before, what had caused the change, and the situation after the change. It also provided check boxes to ensure the person had been informed of the purpose of the interview, and identified whether the story teller had given permission for the story to be used publically and their name included.

On CSP, a small number of stories were also collected by video. While the stories collected by video were excellent, there were a number of logistical constraints to this approach. These were training people in the skills required to capture the stories on video (in addition to collecting the story), ready availability of equipment, and greater time required to capture the story. While story collectors had the option of both approaches, it proved easier to collect stories on paper.

Story tellers were selected through a combination of convenience and purposeful sampling. As MSC seeks the extreme cases, those whom staff knew could tell of significant changes (positive or negative) as a result of the program were deliberately selected. On CSP, a range of stakeholders (eg for an initiative in a school, school students, teacher, principal, board member and parent) were often separately interviewed for a single activity. This was initially a consequence of the training approach. However it was found to have benefits during the analysis and was continued as much as possible.

Training of Story Collectors:

On each Program, story collectors were trained over a two day period. We found that where story collectors already had good facilitation skills (on CSP) less training was

required to achieve the same quality of story than where the story collector had weak facilitation skills. In other cases, we were not able to train story collectors within the time available. This proved the case for journalists (on IASTP III) who struggled to understand that the most significant change had to be selected by the story teller without influence from the story collector. We found they frequently attempted to influence the selection of the story and then slanted it to convey the collectors' message.

Across all Programs, stories collected tended to include minimal detail. It was generally only on the third or fourth story (each with feedback to the story collector) that story collectors began including the rich detail that was wanted. Providing follow-up training when stories were collected proved most effective in addressing this. It also helped establish MSC more soundly.

If the focus is on quality of data collected, it is more effective to engage and train a small number of specific story collectors. If the focus is on participation or capacity building, experience showed that support needed to be provided to those collecting stories for at least three stories, if not four.

Use of Domains:

Domains of change were included on the initial training in FESP. Most trainees found this a difficult concept to understand and after implementation of MSC concluded that it had not added value. We also stopped analysing stories on the basis of separate domains as we found that this was difficult for those still learning about MSC. It also extended the time of selection panels without being seen to add significant value. Discussions with several people in Solomon Islands indicated that this had been their experience on other MSC training. As a result, domains were not included in the training on either IASTP III or CSP.

Instead, the question was structured to focus on the area of impact the evaluation was seeking to address. This could be considered the domain. Examples of questions are given in Box 1.

Box 1: Examples of Questions asked to identify changes on Programs.

Please list the changes you feel have resulted from Enterprise Education.
Please list the most important changes in Coordinating or Provincial Agencies, other organisations, or in the services they deliver, that you feel have resulted from IASTP III activities.
In your opinion, what are the good and bad changes in this village that resulted from CSP activities?

This approach also ensured that our expectations did not limit the responses provided by the story teller. In this way we were able to capture unexpected change.

Until people are confident in applying MSC, I would not include domains in training of story collectors, selection panel facilitators, or general awareness training. I would also not have selection panels consider domains until they were already confident in the overall process.

Language:

Language was often a challenge. On each Program the meaning of 'significant' was discussed. It was a poorly understood word and generally confusing, more so where

English was not the language of the workplace. "Significant" was seen to mean various things including important, main, major, largest and best. In general, 'important' was the closest alternative word, though often still seen as positive changes. The training ensured that story collectors recognised that significant and best were not synonymous. During training we ensured that story collectors understood the concept and that the change could be positive or negative. On IASTP III we translated the word "significant" for the forms story collectors use, however not on FESP (where English was the main language in the workplace) nor on CSP (where translation would need to be into numerous local languages).

To stress the changes could be positive or negative, we included this into the wording of the questions story collectors asked in CSP (Box 1). While many evaluators would argue against using the words 'good or bad', we found that this was the most easily understood in this context. A greater proportion of negative changes were identified on CSP than on the other two Programs. From other data collected, I believe that this does not reflect a difference in program impacts, but the inclusion of the words "good and bad" in the question and a far greater emphasis on this in the training of story collectors than occurred on the other two Programs.

Stories were collected in English on FESP. On CSP they were told in a local language and translated into English by the story collector. The quality of this translation often adversely impacted the story. Edits were done to correct English only where necessary to minimise the possibility of changing the context. On IASTP III stories were told in Bahasa (or a local language) and recorded in Bahasa. They went to selection panels in Bahasa. Stories were translated into English for the selection panel at the highest level. All stories were later translated into English for reporting. In general we found that the quality of stories was better where collected in a language the story collector was confident in and then translated later.

Data Management:

Data management was a major challenge. On FESP (round 1) data was managed through separate word files. Data was often lost after it was used.

For IASTP III, CSP and FESP (round 2) data was centrally entered into a specifically designed Access database. The challenges were timeliness of data entry and accuracy of data entry (particularly on CSP). The databases were designed to record all data collected by the story collector and from the selection panel. They also produced reports to go to selection panels and drafts of feedback for stakeholders. If the data was entered correctly (including spelling and grammar) this meant that reports produced would not need later editing.

The use of a dedicated database provided many benefits. It:
- Prevented loss of data.
- Improved efficiency as reports for selection panels and the feedback brochures were generated from the database.
- Enabled efficient analysis of all the changes identified by the story teller (not just the one they selected as the MSC) and lessons learnt across selection panels.

The use of a database to manage the data is strongly recommended. A web-based database would be preferable as this would enable decentralised entry of data and facilitate wider stakeholder access to the information. I believe that this would improve participation, feedback to stakeholders, and the quality of story collection (story

collectors would quickly see how others were recording the story). I am aware that a company in the United Kingdom (Clear Intent) is currently developing a web based database for MSC.

Analysis:

Panels were most effective when they considered no more than 15 – 20 stories. Across all projects, the discussion in the selection panels tended to be of an adequate standard that facilitated learning. However the documentation of this was generally a weakness (particularly for CSP). We found that the quality of discussion and documentation was better where one person facilitated all selection panels (IASTP III) and gained experience more quickly. Significant support for facilitation of selection panels is required to build the capacity of selection panel facilitators.

The database enabled analysis of all changes identified (rather than just those selected as the MSC). This proved important as negative changes tended to be identified by story tellers as changes, but were rarely selected as the MSC. On CSP and FESP (round 2) changes were analysed against the indicators at a goal and purpose level. They were also analysed for emerging themes. Where MSC is used over the long term, analysis of this data would assist early identification of emerging issues which could then be addressed.

On CSP, the collection of stories relating a single initiative from a range of stakeholders significantly increased the richness of the data. It enabled the actual logic of change to be identified and helped validate findings. On IASTP III and CSP, analysis of the feedback from the selection panels provided valuable data on the factors required for an impact to occur, and the broader effectiveness and impact of activities. It also identified lessons learnt for continuous improvement of these and other programs.

Coding of the changes was not consistently done by those entering data. We found that the language skills and understanding of the program needed to be quite high to enable this to be effective. The changes were all recoded by the Monitoring and Evaluation Adviser before analysis occurred.

Reporting:

A range of reporting approaches were used to try to provide relevant information to different stakeholders in a timely manner. Separate reports were prepared for donors and for other stakeholders. A simple double sided, A4 brochure was used for stakeholders. In Indonesia this was prepared in Bahasa, in other countries in English. This was distributed to story tellers, story collectors, relevant government and non-government organisations, other projects and the donor. On CSP, it was also distributed to other donors working in the sector.

On each Program, the information was incorporated into formal evaluation reports to the donor as one source of evaluation information (along with information gained from other methods such as World Café, questionnaires, group interviews and focus groups). On IASTP III a book was also published which included all the stories collected and the national selection panel's feedback in English and Bahasa. This was widely distributed on Program completion to assist in learning by other donors, agencies and projects. Other than this, separate reports on MSC were not produced for donors.

In Fiji, the MSC stories selected at a national level were included in the Ministry's own newsletters. This was not as appropriate on the other two Programs. Verbal feedback

was also provided to all provincially based staff at national workshops for IASTP III and CSP.

For all Programs, ensuring timeliness of reporting was a challenge. This meant that the second round of story collection was often completed without feedback from the first already having occurred. The database was designed to export required data so that it only needed formatting and minor edits to produce the A4 brochure. However we found that even with this, the feedback was often a low work priority. Continual follow-up was required for feedback to occur in a timely and staggered manner.

Overall the mix of verbal and written feedback was found to be effective. The use of a simple written feedback approach rather than a formal report for most stakeholders also helped maximise the number of people who learnt of the feedback. It was also important to distribute these regularly rather than distributing a large number of different brochures at one time.

The provision of feedback was essential to support change. On IASTP III, public feedback was seen as an acknowledgement of the contribution staff had made where the changes were positive. It also encouraged stakeholders to think about changes that had occurred and encouraged a continuous learning approach. This supported further implementation of change. On FESP (round 1) it helped adoption of what had been identified as good practice or useful innovations in practice across all the areas MSC was used. It also supported continuous improvement of Program support. However because MSC was only adopted on IASTP III, CSP and FESP (round 2) in the final year of the Programs, these benefits of MSC were not maximised.

The introduction of MSC on FESP (round 1) had another unexpected benefit. It provided a simple demonstration of how data from monitoring and evaluation could be used to improve service delivery. The fact that it is qualitative rather than quantitative assisted those not familiar with evaluation methods gain a better understanding of evaluation without needing to understand 'the maths'. The large numbers of people who participated maximised those whose awareness about evaluation was improved. This was one of the factors that contributed to the Ministry becoming a strong supporter of evaluation, moving quickly to improve the quality of their monitoring and evaluation and adopting evidence based decision making.

Resource Requirements:

MSC is extremely resource intensive in terms of time. It was this that led the Ministry of Education on FESP to decide that they would not implement MSC themselves. This also led to FESP contracting a specific person and to coordinate the process and collect stories the second time they introduced the process. On both IASTP III and CSP a national M&E consultant was engaged to coordinate the process (while having their capacity built). Without this, it is unlikely that MSC could have been successfully introduced.

Conclusion

For each of the Programs, MSC was a valuable part of the overall evaluation and provided information for the evaluation that was not gained through the other data collection methods that were used. It was most effective in identifying impacts (and the reason for these) which had not necessarily been anticipated. It also supported development of an enhanced understanding of, and support for, evaluation.

However, it is important to remember that MSC is just one method for evaluation. When planning any evaluation, the evaluator must consider what methods are appropriate in the specific situation and only use those appropriate; this may or may not include MSC. It must also be recognised that MSC does not replace M&E, rather it is one part of it. From our experience, MSC should not be used where:

- The evaluation is looking for typical cases. MSC focuses on extreme cases.
- There is no sense of 'mystery' about the outcomes, they are known, well defined and measurable.
- The evaluation focus of is accountability rather than learning.
- Training of story collectors and selection panel facilitators can not be well resourced.
- There is an expectation that it is 'easy' and needs little support.
- There is an expectation that it will require few if any additional resources. MSC is very time intensive.
- Feedback will not be given. Use other forms of qualitative evaluation.

The value of MSC can be maximised by:

- Using it over the life of the Program so that it is able to support change.
- Providing formal and on-the-job training to story collectors and selection panel facilitators over an extended period. Particular emphasis needs to be placed on the level of detail in stories collected and documentation of selection panel findings.
- Only introducing the concept of domains when those involved are confident in MSC.
- Specifically stating you are seeking "good and bad" changes (despite evaluators dislike for these terms).
- Remembering that the people you think best suited to story collection may not be. If this is the case, the poor quality of data collected will adversely impact the whole evaluation.
- Documenting stories in a language that the story collector is confident in and undertaking translations (if required) later.
- Managing data collected with a database which facilitates effective management of data and efficient analysis of data. A web based database facilitating decentralised data entry and maximising access to the data may be most effective.
- Consider having one person facilitate and document all selection panels, otherwise provide significant support in this process.
- Considering no more than 15 – 20 at a single selection panel.
- Analysing all the data collected, not just the MSC story, or the stories selected by the selection panel.
- Using reporting which meets each stakeholders needs, this may require a variety of reporting approaches.
- Developing a simple and easy reporting process for stakeholders which minimises the time until feedback is received and maximises its distribution.

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improved application of MSC. The views in this paper are my own and do not necessarily represent those of AusAID, the Australian Government, Cardno Acil or GHD Hassall.

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