Most Significant Change (MSC) Approach in Evaluation

The experience from the application of MSC in the African Development Bank

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Outline

- Purpose of the interactive webinar.
- The Most Significant Change (MSC) approach.
- Key steps in MSC in monitoring and evaluation.
- Short Break!
- Experience of application of MSC in evaluation of decentralization in the African Development Bank.
- Some concluding remarks.
Purpose of the Webinar

• To share information on the application of MSC approach in evaluation with an example from the AfDB.
• Gather feedback on the participants’ experience in the application of this approach.
• Conclude on the utility of MSC approach.
What is MSC Approach?

Most Significant Change (MSC) approach is a systematic, transparent and participatory method of collecting and analyzing qualitative information about change. This information is in the form of stories of change, obtained through individual interviews, which are then subject to selection by different stakeholder groups.

- This qualitative monitoring and evaluation technique was developed by Dr. Rick Davies in the 1990s. Since then the approach has acquired wide acceptance and adaptations in the evaluation practice.
- Dr. Davies and team carried out the MSC exercise in the Bank in 2009 as part of the IDEV Evaluation of the Bank’s Decentralization Strategy and Process, carried out by IOD PARC, UK.

- **Key references:**
  - Evaluating Decentralisation in the AfDB: The use of Most Significant Change stories By Rick Davies, Juana Espasa, Isabelle Lemaire.
  - Decentralizing AfDB blog managed by Dr. Davis. [http://decentralisingadb.wordpress.com](http://decentralisingadb.wordpress.com)
  - Guide to the use of MSC by Rick Davies and Jess Dart.

[All available online]
Key Steps in applying MSC for Monitoring and Evaluation

1. Starting and raising interest
2. Defining the domains of change
3. Defining the reporting period
4. Collecting the significant change stories
5. Selecting the most significant of the stories
6. Feeding back the results of the selection process
7. Verification of the stories
8. Quantification
9. Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring
10. Revising the system
1: How to start and raise interest

• Explain the methodology to selected individuals or groups.
• Start small. Begin as a pilot to see what works and what does not.
• Champions play a major role. Motivate people, explain the technique, facilitate collection of stories, ensure feedback, maintain confidentiality where necessary.
2. Define the domains of change

- Domains are **broad categories of SC stories**. Examples:
  - Portfolio Quality
  - Head Office – Field Office Relations
  - Country Dialogue
- Domains of change are **not indicators**. Allows different interpretations of what constitutes change in the area.
- Ideally **3-5 domains** are manageable.
- Use **predetermined domains** as well as **open window domains**.
- Can have **negative change domains**.
3. Define the reporting period

Monitoring: Determine frequency as per the reporting requirements.
Evaluation: Usually one off exercise.
4. Collecting SC Stories

- Ask an open question: “During the abc period, what do you think was the most significant change in the xyz domain of change?”
- Interviews and note taking
- Beneficiary writes the story
- Use of videos
- Each story should specify: a) who collected; b) description of the story; and c) significance
5. Selecting MSC stories

- **Iterative process** of selecting and then pooling stories.
- **Can use the existing hierarchy of organization.**
- Decide: the number of levels, how many processes, how many stories, who should participate.
- Selection process should be **open debate**. Read in group, discuss, select the most significant, show reason.
- Majority vote, iterative voting, rating, secret ballot can be used.
- **Participants:** Beneficiaries, field staff, line management and people with advisory capacities can be involved in selection.
- **Document** the selection process.
- The **filtered out stories have value at certain levels** though they are not the most significant.
Selecting MSC stories

Flow of stories and feedback

*Figure 2. Flow of stories and feedback in MSC*

Source: Guide to MSC
6. Feeding back results of selection process

• Feedback given to the providers of the story. This completes the feedback loop and creates ongoing dialogue on what is significant change.

• Use different media to provide the feedback.
7: Verification of stories

- Needed to ensure the change actually happened. There could be fictions, exaggerations and misunderstandings.
- Verify only the ones selected as most significant. Not randomly selected ones.
8. Quantification

Emphasis on qualitative reporting but quantification is possible.

– Within individual stories: number of people, activities...
– During feedback stage: specific quantitative data on specific phenomena observed
– Analysis of full set of stories, frequency of occurrence
9. Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring

- Examination, classification and analysis of content of all stories. [Done less frequently. Less participatory process.]
- Keep record of all stories and the process in a retrievable format.
- Meta-monitoring: a) number of stories reported and trend; b) who is writing and who is not; c) whose stories are selected and whose not; d) recommendations acted upon.
- Secondary analysis can contribute to summative evaluation. Contributing to the analysis of outcomes.
10. Revising the system

• Almost all organizations using MSC have made changes in the content and the way MSC is implemented.
  – Names of domains change
  – Frequency of reporting
  – Types of participants
  – Structure of meetings

• Evaluation of MSC approach applied.
When and When not to use MSC

Useful for:

- Complex programs that produce diverse and emergent outcomes
- Large program with several organizational layers
- Focused on social change
- Participatory in ethos and design
- Monitoring and evaluations that focus on learning more than accountability
When and when not to use MSC

• Less useful when:
  – Capture expected change
  – For retrospective evaluations of projects/programs that are completed
  – For quick and low-cost evaluations

• Key Enablers:
  – Organizational cultures that accept failures
  – Champions with good facilitation skills
  – Have time to run several cycles of the approach
  – Commitment by senior management
MSC and organizational learning

• Can influence the values of stakeholders including staff within the organization.
• Dialogue is inbuilt in the process facilitates learning.
• Fostering a shared vision.
MSC in Evaluation of the AfDB’s Decentralization

• Undertook a forward looking formative evaluation of the decentralization strategy and process at the AfDB.
• Used a mixed methods approach – combining quantitative and qualitative.
• MSC focus:
  – Changes in the management of portfolio
  – Changes in the country dialogue
  – Changes in the HQ-FO relations
Rationale of collecting SC stories

– To identify significant unexpected and difficult-to-quantify changes.
– To provide more in-depth descriptions of events monitored.
– To identify areas of agreement and disagreement about the expected outcomes and process.
– To promote a dialogue between FOs and HQ about the decentralisation process.
– Through these processes:
  • Identify innovations.
  • Identify risks to AfDB’s current level of performance.
  • Identify strategic choices to approach decentralisation.
MSC Process

In-country process

- 4 countries: Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania

- Process followed:
  - Introductory briefing to all staff
  - One-on-one interviews with sample staff
  - Video summary of individual interviews
  - FO team meeting to select MSC from interviews
  - Meeting with government stakeholders to select MSC
  - Debriefing with FO staff
  - Stories uploaded on DecentralisingAfDB blog
MSC Process

**Individual interviews:** 21 people in 4 countries. Mix of staff. Total: 36%

**Stakeholder selection discussions in-country**

- Involving the FO team
  - Selection meeting with available staff
  - Individual interviews and selection of stories in team
  - Video summary of the MSC story
- Involving government stakeholders
- Meetings with donor partners
MSC Process

Stakeholder selection & discussion at AfDB HQ

- Regional Departments
- Sector Departments
- Finance and Corporate Services Departments
- Decentralization Working Group

Sought answers for the following questions:
- Was there anything in these stories that was new to you?
- What kinds of stories have not been told?

DecentralisingAfDB Blog

Used a blog in order to ensure wider feedback, transparency and participation.
Results: Stories collected and selected

63 SC stories through 21 interviews in 4 countries

• MSC in country dialogue
  – AfDB mobilizes donors to address the government’s high priority needs [Sierra Leone]

• MSC in portfolio quality Improvement
  – Disbursement speeded up through better document management [Sierra Leone]
  – Proactive portfolio review reduced processing time by 1-3 months [Burkina Faso]

• MSC in HQ-FO relationships
  – Better communications means a more responsive FO [Sierra Leone]
  – Great trust in the FO is increasing efficiency of Bank operations [Burkina Faso]
  – Locating a Task Manager in the FO speeded up implementation [Nigeria]
Results: Progress with the stated objectives

- What is new? Received Mixed responses.
- Difficult to quantify changes. Yes.
- Areas of agreement and disagreement:
  - HQ agreement strongest on portfolio
  - Agreement weakest on country dialogue
Concluding Remarks

- Use of Participatory approach in IDEV evaluation was new at that time, and well-received by stakeholders.
- MSC helped generate greater awareness about the benefits of decentralization – led to greater decentralization.
- Contributed to the formative evaluation by supplementing evaluative information.
- Costly – about 40% of the evaluation budget.
- Some stakeholders questioned the value for money, as many change stories were intuitive.
- The MSC approach served the purpose.
Thank you!