Most Significant Change (MSC) Approach in Evaluation

&

The experience from application of MSC in the African Development Bank

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Outline

• Purpose of the webinar
• The Most Significant Change (MSC) approach
• MSC in monitoring and evaluation – the key steps
• MSC in program evaluation
• Experience of MSC in evaluation of decentralization in the Bank
• 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 colleagues’ experience in the application of this approach (or other qualitative approaches) in monitoring or in evaluation.
- Conclude on the utility of MSC in IDEV evaluations.
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 is a qualitative monitoring and evaluation technique, 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 Decentralization Strategy and Process in the Bank.

• Key references:
  – Decentralizing AFDB blog managed by Rick Davis. http://decentralisingadb.wordpress.com
  – Guide to the use of MSC by Rick Davies and Jess Dart.
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 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
Step 1: How to start and raise interest

- Explain 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, facilitation of collection of stories, ensure feedback, maintain confidentiality where necessary.
Step 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 domain.
- Can have negative change domains.
- Not necessary to be predetermined.
Step 3. Define the reporting period

Monitoring: Frequency as per the reporting requirements.

Evaluation: Usually one off exercise
Step 4. Collecting SC Stories

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

Uses hierarchy of selection process

Flow of stories and feedback in MSC

Source: Guide to MSC
Step 5. Selecting MSC stories

• **Iterative process** of selecting and then pooling stories
• Can use the hierarchy of existing organization.
• Decide: number of levels, how many processes, how many stories, who should participate
• Selection process should be open debate. Read in group, discuss, select 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.
• Filtered out stories have value at certain levels though they are not the most significant.
Step 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. The Bank used a specially designed blog.
Step 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.
Step 8. Quantification

Emphasis on **qualitative** reporting but quantification possible.

– Within individual stories: no. of people, activities...
– During feedback stage: specific quantitative data on specific phenomena observed
– Analysis of full set of stories, frequency of occurrence
Step 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.
Step 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 done.
When and When not to use MSC

Useful when

– 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 that are completed
  – For quick and cheap 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 in Monitoring and Evaluation

- MSC is a monitoring tool and an evaluation tool.
- MSC goes beyond monitoring and focusses on outcomes and impact.
- For expected outcomes of agreed significance: predefined indicators are most useful.
- Outcomes of disagreed significance and expected: indicators and MSC are useful.
- Unexpected outcomes agreed and disagreed significance: MSC is useful.
- MSC is complementary to conventional monitoring and evaluation.
- MSC tells us about unexpected outcomes, intangible and indirect consequences.
- MSC enables rather than directs the participants.
- MSC enables broad participation.
- MSC puts events in context.
- MSC enables changing focus on what is important. Reflecting real changes and views on what is important.
MSC as program evaluation

• MSC can render judgments, facilitate improvements and/or generate knowledge
• MSC can be built into a summative evaluation as a preceding activity.
• Can be used to identify and aggregate large scale stakeholder views.
• Can be combined with a theory based evaluation.
• Rank stories rather than selecting only the MS.
MSC and organizational learning

• Can influence the values of stakeholders including staff within the organization.
• Dialogue inbuilt in the process facilitates learning.
Other Uses of MSC

• Fostering a shared vision
• Building staff capacity in evaluation
• Providing material for communication and publicity
• Providing materials for training staff
• Celebrating success
MSC in Evaluation of the AfDB’s Decentralization

- Forward looking formative evaluation of the decentralization strategy and process.
- Used a mixed methods approach - quantitative and qualitative.
- MSC focus:
  - Changes in the management of the AfDB 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 selected: Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania

- Process:
  - Introductory briefing to all staff
  - 1-1 interviews with sampled staff
  - Videoed 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%

Process:
- Intro and explanation of the process
- Focus on one domain of change out of the 3 identified, reason and details of the change
- Repeat the process with other domains of change
- Explain what would happen and possibilities of correction
MSC Process

Stakeholder selection discussion in-country

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

Stakeholder selection discussion at AfDB HQ

– Regional Departments
– Sector Departments
– Finance and Corporate Services
– Decentralization Working Group
  • Was there anything in these stories that was new to you?
  • What kinds of stories have not been told?

DecentralisingAfDB Blog (to ensure wider feedback, transparency and participation)
Decentralising the AfDB
Stories of change, from AfDB country office staff and local stakeholders

About this site

Contents of this page: | The background | What is this website? | How is it organised? | What is the purpose? | Who was involved? | What process was used? | Where did this method come from? | Who to contact? | Password access | Progress Reports (in MS Word) |
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 need [Sierra Leone]

- MSC in portfolio quality Improvement
  - Disbursement speeded up through better document management [Sierra Leone]
  - Proactive portfolio review reduces processing time by 1-3 months [B 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 TM in the FO speeds up implementation [Nigeria]
Results: Progress with the stated objectives

• What is new? **Mixed response.**
• Difficult to quantify changes. **Yes.**
• Areas of agreement and disagreement
  – HQ agreement strongest on **portfolio**
  – Agreement weakest on **country dialogue**
Concluding Remarks

• Participatory approach in evaluation was new and well-received by stakeholders
• Contributed to the formative evaluation by supplementing evaluative information
• Costly – about 40% of the evaluation budget
• Some questioned value for money – many change stories were intuitive.