

# The Most Significant Change Approach in Evaluation: A quick guide and its application at the African Development Bank

On 7 June 2019, as part of its support to the gLOCAL Evaluation Week organized by the Centers for Learning on Evaluation and Results (see “News in Pictures” section), IDEV hosted a webinar on ‘Most Significant Change (MSC) in Evaluation: The experience from the application of MSC in the African Development Bank.’ The [webinar](#) was delivered by Madhusoodhanan (Madhu) Mampuzhasseril, Chief Evaluation Officer at IDEV, and drew on the seminal work by Dr. Rick Davies on the subject as well as the Evaluation of the African Development Bank’s Decentralization Strategy and Process (Davies 2005 and 2009; AfDB 2009). Madhu’s presentation gave an overview of the MSC approach and described how the Bank has used this approach in the past. The following is a summary of the key points discussed during the webinar and the question-and-answer session following the presentation.

**Madhusoodhanan (Madhu) Mampuzhasseril, IDEV, African Development Bank**

## Description of the Approach

**M**sc 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 (Davies R. and Jess Dart (2005). The MSC technique focusses on the collection and systematic analysis of significant changes caused by an intervention. It is worth noting that MSC is not intended to be a stand-alone technique for monitoring and evaluation. MSC combines well with other evaluation methods such as short surveys and focus group discussions.

### Steps in applying MSC

#### Step 1: Start by raising interest

- Explain the evaluation methodology to selected individuals or groups.
- Start small. Begin as a pilot to see what works and what does not.
- Identify key “champions” who will motivate people, explain the technique, facilitate the collection of stories, ensure feedback, and

maintain confidentiality where/when necessary.

#### Step 2: Define the domains of change

- Domains are broad categories of Significant Change (sc) stories.
- Domains of change are not indicators. Allows different interpretations of what constitutes change in the area.
- Ideally 3 to 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 a one-off exercise

#### Step 4: Collect significant change 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 ▶

MSC CAN BE USED FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION...	AND FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ MSC can render judgments, facilitate improvements and/or generate knowledge.</li> <li>■ MSC can be built into a summative evaluation as a preceding activity.</li> <li>■ Can be used to identify and aggregate large scale stakeholder views.</li> <li>■ Can be combined with a theory based evaluation.</li> <li>■ Rank stories rather than selecting only the MS.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Can influence the values of stakeholders including staff within the organization.</li> <li>■ Dialogue built into the process facilitates learning.</li> </ul>

- ▶ ■ Through group discussions
- Beneficiary writes the story
- Use of videos
- Each story should specify: a) who collected; b) description; and c) significance

**Step 5: Select 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.
- The 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: Feed back the results of the 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: Verify the stories**

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

**Step 8: Quantify whenever possible**

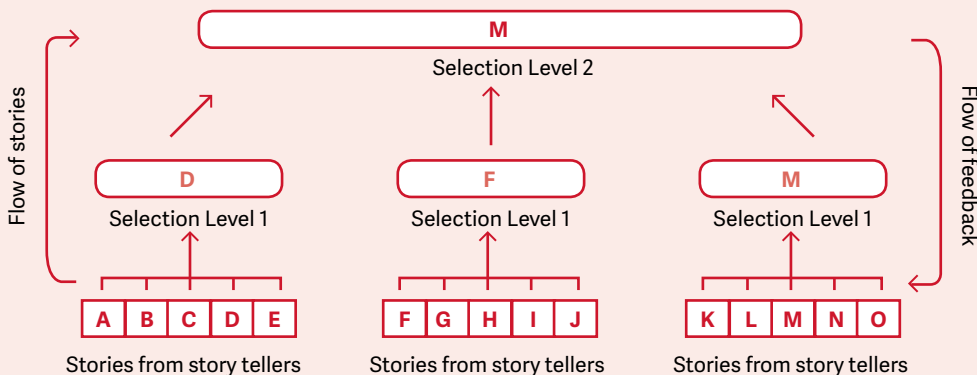
MSC emphasis is on qualitative reporting but quantification is possible.

- 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: Perform secondary analysis and meta-monitoring**

- Examine, classify and analyze content of all stories.
- 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. ▶▶

**Figure 1: Selecting MSC stories - Flow of stories and feedback in MSC**



Source: Guide to MSC



- ▶ ■ Secondary analysis can contribute to summative evaluation. Contributing to the analysis of outcomes.

### *Step 10: Revise the system to fit your evaluation needs*

- Almost all organizations that have used MSC made changes in the content and the way in which MSC was implemented.
- Names of domains change
- Frequency of reporting
- Types of participants
- Structure of meetings

### **When and when not to use it?**

#### *Useful to evaluate*

- Complex programs that produce diverse and emergent outcomes
- Large programs with several organizational layers
- Programs focused on social change
- Programs whose evaluation is participatory in ethos and design
- When the evaluation focuses on learning more than accountability

#### *Less useful for*

- Evaluations that aim to capture expected change
- Retrospective evaluations of programs that are completed
- Quick and low-cost evaluations

#### *Key Enablers of MSC*

- Organizational cultures that accept failures
- Champions with good facilitation skills
- Having the time to run several cycles of the approach
- Commitment by senior management

### **The MSC approach in practice**

In 2008 the MSC approach was used as part of a formative evaluation of the

decentralization strategy and process of the African Development Bank. The evaluation aimed to: a) identify unexpected changes; b) provide a more in-depth description of the events monitored; c) identify areas of agreement and disagreement about the expected outcomes and process; d) promote a dialogue between the Bank headquarters and Field Offices about the decentralization process; and e) identify, through this process, innovations, risks to performance and strategic choices to approach decentralization.

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach to gather both qualitative and quantitative evaluative evidence. It is in this context that the MSC technique was used to collect qualitative information about perceptions of changes- as a result of the decentralization strategy- in the following areas:

1. Changes in AfDB's country dialogue: with government, donors, private sector, and civil society
2. Changes in the management of the AfDB country portfolios
3. Changes in the relationship between AfDB country office and AfDB headquarters

Sixty-three (63) Significant Change stories were collected through 21 interviews conducted in four country offices (Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Tanzania), and analyzed to arrive at the most significant changes due to the decentralization process. Through the selected stories, the following most significant changes were highlighted:

#### *Changes in the Bank's country dialogue*

- AfDB mobilizes donors to address the government's high priority needs

#### *Changes in the management of the Bank country portfolios*

- Disbursement speeded up through better document management ▶▶

- ▶ **Proactive portfolio review reduces processing time by 1-3 months**

### *Changes in the relationship between the Bank's country office and AfDB headquarters*

- Better communications means a more responsive FO
- Great trust in the FO is increasing the efficiency of Bank operations
- Locating a task manager in the FO speeds up implementation

The results of the entire MSC exercise are documented on a blog Decentralising AfDB<sup>1</sup> accessible to all AfDB staff. Video summaries are also provided, along with summaries of the discussions of the stories by the FO teams and four stakeholder groups at AfDB Headquarters. The exercise was instrumental in helping inform the mid-term review of the 11<sup>th</sup> African Development Fund (ADF) in 2009, as well as the ADF replenishment discussions conducted in 2010.

### **Challenges of using MSC to evaluate the AfDB decentralization strategy**

One of the main challenges reported with using this approach was the ability to secure the availability of respondents and program staff to attend the interviews and other related activities to select the most significant stories. It required good planning and coordination from the evaluation team to keep and abide by a tight schedule while on site. The approach was also considered relatively costly (about 40% of the evaluation budget) by some stakeholders.

### **Concluding observations**

To recap, the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is a tool most suited for collecting, discussing and selecting stories about the significant changes that people experience as a result of a particular program or intervention. It involves people at ▶



► different levels of an organisation discussing the stories and then selecting the stories they consider most significant. This process aims to promote ongoing dialogue and learning about programs and/or interventions and how they can be improved to better meet their aims. It also useful in enabling discussion about the unexpected or negative changes that may have happened as a result of a program and/or intervention.

In our case study, the MSC approach was well received by AfDB stakeholders. It generated greater awareness amongst stakeholders about the complexity and benefits of the Bank's decentralization process, leading to the decision at the Senior Management level to accelerate

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the process. From the evaluation team's perspective, the MSC approach contributed to the formative evaluation of the Bank decentralization process by supplementing other evaluative information, and it served its purpose well.

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## References

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## Endnote

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1. Decentralizing AfDB blog is managed by Dr. Rick Davies. It is accessible by AfDB Bank staff at: <http://decentralisingadblog.wordpress.com>

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## Author's profile

**Madhusoodhanan (Madhu) Mampuzhasseril** is Chief Evaluation Officer at IDEV, the division responsible for Agriculture, Human and Social Development, Country and Corporate Evaluations.



Prior to joining the African Development Bank in 2009, Madhu worked with IDEV as a long-term consultant, involved in sector-level evaluations of health, education, and agriculture and rural development, and in the corporate evaluations of the Bank's decentralization strategy and process, and the quality-at-entry of ADF operations and strategies 2005-2008. Other corporate evaluations that he has completed in recent years include those of the Bank's operational procurement policy and practice, administrative budget management, human resource management, and the Bank's quality assurance process across the project cycle. He has also managed the Country Strategy and Program Evaluations for Ghana and Zambia.

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