

The most significant lessons about the Most Significant Change technique

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Abstract

This paper presents field-based insight into the application of the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique as a method to monitor social change resulting from a development intervention. The literature that focuses on this innovative qualitative monitoring technique is slowly growing, however, is mostly limited to grey literature, and there is little detailed critique available. Particularly, there is a lack of rigorous investigation to pin-point the complexities and challenges of applying the technique with integrity in the development context. This paper employs a conceptual model of monitoring and evaluation practicalities (the 'M&E Data Cycle') to systematically examine challenges and key components to successful application of the MSC technique. We provide a detailed analysis of how MSC was employed in two projects in Laos, extracting the lessons learnt and insights generated. This practice-based information can inform future deployment of the MSC technique and evolve its development.

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Introduction

The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) technique was initially developed by Rick Davies in 1995 to monitor and evaluate a participatory rural development program in Bangladesh, and therefore has its roots in the international development industry (Davies, 1998). Since that time it has been applied more widely, including within programs in developed economies (see for example, Dart and Davies, 2003). In essence, MSC is a participatory monitoring technique that involves the collection of stories of 'significant change' from the field, and the systematic selection of the most significant of these stories by groups of designated stakeholders or staff (Davies and Dart, 2005).

The MSC technique arose out of a need to overcome the inadequacies of conventional monitoring processes in situations where program impacts are difficult to quantify, and where a focus on learning is desirable, not just on accountability (Davies, 1998a). Such situations include programs that are complex and result in diverse outcomes, ones that are large in size and where the focus is on social change (Davies and Dart, 2005). Conventional monitoring methods use prescriptive criteria to verify achievement of defined project goals, objectives and outputs (Broughton and Hampshire 1997; Cracknell 2000; Coleman 1987). These criteria are generally established by program designers rather than participants or beneficiaries (Crawford and Bryce 2003). The result is sometimes a focus on the mechanics of implementation of the project, rather than the actual changes engendered within the lives of beneficiaries, and the learning that might be gained by increasing one's understanding of these changes (Fowler 1997; Kaplan 1999; Roche 1999).

This paper addresses a gap in the literature concerning the complexities that arise with application of the MSC technique in the field. Such critical analysis is needed given the increasing interest in this technique within the development industry. It is imperative that the technique's apparent simplicity does not result in blind application of what is in fact a delicate, multi-faceted process of interpretative research.

The lessons discussed in this paper were identified through an external evaluation of a pilot of the MSC technique by the primary author. This pilot was conducted within two water and sanitation projects in Laos, implemented by the Adventist Development & Relief Agency (ADRA) in the north (Luangnamtha) and south, (Attapeu) of the country, respectively. The MSC pilot took place during 2003 – 2004 with a view to wider deployment of the technique across other ADRA projects in Laos, and elsewhere within the ADRA International network. In terms of methodology, the evaluation involved focus groups and interviews with a range of stakeholders of the monitoring system. It investigated the efficiency, efficacy and effectiveness of the pilot MSC system. The external evaluation itself is reported elsewhere (Willets, 2004). Here we limit the focus to important implications for development practice. A conceptual framework to enable our analysis is followed by the perceived benefits of using this innovative technique and lessons learned for future use in the development context.

M&E Data Cycle

Crawford (2004), in considering the practicalities of M&E, suggests that irrespective of how ‘monitoring’ and ‘evaluation’ are defined, or the particular methods employed, a series of basic processes are involved. This series of processes has been described as the ‘M&E Data Cycle’, and is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The M&E Data Cycle

The first stage of the M&E Data Cycle, *identification*, concerns selection of what particular data is required to achieve the intended purpose of M&E. Within conventional approaches to M&E, this frequently entails defining indicators that are tracked throughout the life of the project.

The second stage of the M&E Data Cycle concerns the *capture* of the identified data. This may involve a range of formal and informal ‘methods of inquiry’ and various stakeholders.

The third stage of the M&E Data Cycle concerns the *analysis* to which raw, captured data will be subjected to draw out meaningful features and trends. Unless data is subjected to some form of analysis, its capture represents a waste of time and resources.

The fourth stage of the M&E Data Cycle concerns the mechanisms and protocols by which the M&E findings (analysed data) can be *disseminated* to the various stakeholders. It is particularly important that information is relevant to the recipients, and is received in a timely and accessible format. The concept of ‘feedback’ of analysis is an important, but frequently overlooked part of dissemination.

The fifth stage of the M&E Data Cycle concerns how the various stakeholders will *utilise* the M&E findings. Utilisation is embodied in the broad purpose of M&E—to promote learning and accountability. If the use for data is not known from the outset, it is a possibility that it will remain unused—a waste of organisational effort and resources.

The final stage of the M&E Data Cycle, *assessment*, concerns reflection about whether or not the data identified in the first stage, having been utilised, has demonstrably contributed to improved organisational learning and accountability. This final stage of the M&E Data Cycle may be considered ‘meta-M&E’—M&E of the M&E system. The evaluation of the MSC technique in Laos (Willetts, 2004) is an example of meta-M&E.

Experience shows that each stage of the M&E Data Cycle may be affected by a range of practical and conceptual constraints. The cumulative effect of these constraints is a breakdown of the M&E system, and hence underachievement of the broad objectives of M&E. The M&E Data Cycle is used in this paper as a conceptual framework for analysing how the MSC technique was employed in the case study situation in Laos. This generic M&E framework was chosen as our goal was to comprehensively

analyse the MSC process and extract useful information about how the MSC technique can be applied with integrity in the field.

The following section summarises briefly the many purported benefits of using the MSC technique, before examining challenges identified in the Laos MSC pilot in the light of the M&E Data Cycle (Figure 1) discussed above since the focus of this paper is on the learning that might be gained through such a critique.

Benefits of using MSC

Davies and Dart (2005) discuss the contexts and purposes to which MSC is best suited, and point out that MSC focuses primarily on learning rather than accountability. The experience of both the ADRA Lao management staff and field staff concurs with this view. The primary benefits identified by management staff were that it “forced in-depth development thinking”, “created deep changes in people’s thinking among the staff” and “helped us learn what actually happens, at least for some cases”. Field staff made similar observations, captured in statements such as “We can measure if work done is fruitful or not. Did they understand? Did they practice or not?”; “We can work up close with villagers, not get shy, we open mind together”; and “It gives us time to look at our work and see what we have done”. These views are all concerned with reflection and learning, and openly questioning what happened as a result of the project. Of particular interest in these quotes, is that staff were drawn to reflect on stories as they applied to their role within the organisation. Field staff tuned in to learning about how they interact with villagers and their project activities. Management staff focused on how the organization works and the outlook of the organisation with respect to its *raison d’être*.

Another advantage of MSC is its ability to inform other M&E processes. For instance, in Laos, insight derived through the negative stories about real or potential problems with project implementation was used to give focus to the monitoring field visits by the management staff. In addition, the staff envisaged using the evidence provided by the MSC stories to compliment other more traditional quantitative assessments of project outcomes for their program evaluation purposes. In particular, MSC’s ability to capture unplanned change makes it a valuable addition to conventional methods of M&E.

Besides the above benefits identified for ADRA Laos and its staff, it is also worth addressing the benefits for project beneficiaries. These were not measured directly during the external evaluation, but some likely implications can be proposed based on observed changes in the behaviour of field and management staff. Their heightened sensitivity to the point of view of the beneficiaries and more developed relationships with them would be expected to be conducive to more desirable project outcomes for project beneficiaries. Although not done in Laos, it might also be possible to extend such benefits to beneficiaries or to particular discriminated groups through debate at the community level about what constitutes desirable change. This could be done either within the framework of the MSC monitoring method, or simply as an area of useful dialogue between community and the relevant aid agency.

Challenges in the Field and Keys to Successful Implementation

The sections below report significant lessons from the Laos experience against the six stages of the M&E Data Cycle (Figure 1). In so doing, factors most critical to successful implementation of a MSC system are identified such that they might inform future applications of this technique.

Identification

Within conventional approaches to M&E, the identification stage of the M&E Data Cycle frequently involves the definition of indicators. The MSC technique has been described as “indicator-free monitoring” (Kelly 2002; Davies 1998; Sigsgaard, 2002). Instead of indicators, the ‘data’ collected is oral stories of change (which are subsequently transcribed), including a participant’s view of *why* the change reported is considered significant. In addition, the stories are often aligned with particular ‘domains of change’ deemed of interest to project stakeholders for the purposes of studying project impact.

Crawford (2004) suggests that the predominant constraint encountered at the identification stage of the M&E Data Cycle relates to the need for rigorous planning of M&E processes. In the absence of rigorous planning, the M&E processes are likely to breakdown, or at least be ambiguous. In terms of rigorous planning, a critical factor to the success of the use of MSC will be based on a thorough planning of how all the stages of the M&E cycle are expected to occur and who will be involved. With respect to the implementation of the MSC technique, the following are particularly important elements that need to be planned in advance:

- **Data source:** precisely who within the beneficiary community will be interviewed in order to obtain stories of change?
- **Informant:** who within the project implementation team will be tasked with capturing the stories?
- **Data client/s:** to whom within the organizational hierarchy will the stories be submitted such that debate and selection can take place?
- **Schedule for data capture:** the anticipated frequency of story capture?
- **Schedule for story selection:** the anticipated frequency of debate and story selection?

In this section we limit discussion to ‘data source’ rather than all five of these elements, as these are discussed with respect to other stages of the M&E cycle in follow sections.

In Laos, we believe that the process of recruitment of ‘data sources’ in the MSC pilot (i.e. individuals in target villages who supplied stories of change) was not adequately representative. This was so both in terms of the range of villages covered, and the demographics within these villages. Rather than thorough planning of what constitutes representative data sources, the selection occurred by a default, yet pragmatic process. The more accessible villages, and those villages where MSC training sessions took place, provided the bulk of the stories collected. Also, within a given village, staff collected stories from “whoever they came across” and in one case, “someone who looks friendly” rather than seeking to gain a more representative sample or even a purposive sample. Middle-aged community members were potentially missed since they were often out in the field rather than in the village itself, and children were rarely approached. With more careful planning, important information might have

been gained through speaking with certain groups. For instance, community members closely engaged in project activities or community members known to disapprove of the project. A further issue was that the gender balance in the stories collected occurred more by chance than design. The field staff comprised a relatively equal mixture of both sexes, and serendipitously, the stories collected reflected this balance. Given that the entire M&E process rests upon this initial step of identification of data sources, we would argue that in future use of MSC, due attention is given to identifying the appropriate range of sources of stories of change.

A second aspect of the choice of data sources in Laos was that field staff were encouraged to report stories of change based on their own observations in target villages. This was done to address concerns about the veracity of stories collected from community members, and to provide other angles to the monitoring of change. It turned out that this additional data source did indeed provide valuable stories, however was abandoned after the pilot project due to the confusion it created. The field staff found it difficult to play essentially dual roles: 'data source' and 'informant'. During the pilot it became clear that writing stories both from their own point of view (i.e. as data source), and from the perspective of a village storyteller (i.e. as informant) blurred the line between these roles. The lesson here is that perhaps in the initial stages in employing MSC, a single role is more than enough for field staff to grasp conceptually and practically. Once the technique has been understood, adding field staff stories could be beneficial, and less likely to cause the confusion it resulted in the Laos experience. These practical issues highlight the importance of planning; with due consideration given to each stage of the M&E Data Cycle. In addition, it becomes evident that there is a strong need for intensive training and capacity building among staff in order to implement the MSC effectively.

Data capture

In the context of the MSC technique, data capture involves the posing of an open-ended question concerning perceptions of significant change to a willing participant (data source) by a project implementation team member (informant). Crawford (2004) argues that *compliance* by informants with prescribed data capture protocols is the predominant constraint at this stage of the M&E Data Cycle. The notion of compliance is understood to encompass not only the question of whether or not the prescribed protocols have been implemented on time, but also whether or not they have been implemented to the required quality. With some conventional M&E methods, compliance might simply involve the timely implementation of surveys or the submission of reports in line with a regimented organisational cycle. With the MSC technique, compliance requires that informants *opportunistically* gather stories of significant change, and hence is dependent on informants developing a habit of including story collection as part of their core work. Data capture in MSC is in some ways a form of interpretative research, and hence achieving quality in data capture is a rather more complex process, as demonstrated by the issues outlined below.

In using MSC, the quality of data capture is dependent on higher-order skills than with many conventional M&E methods. Not only are the facts that underpin a story of change to be captured, but also interpretation of why the change is considered significant by the data source. Some of the Lao field staff appeared to have natural ability with asking questions in an open-ended manner and discovering interesting stories from villagers. Others, despite attending MSC training sessions, tended to ask

leading questions that influenced the villager's responses. Use of particular 'domains of change' to categorise stories seemed to exacerbate this issue by focusing the conversation on particular issues. Many staff spoke of the difficulty of remembering story details when writing retrospectively, and also the difficulty of maintaining the 'voice' of the villager and rather used their own words. Some staff were uncomfortable expressing themselves in written form. A final and critical point was that some staff reported difficulties with conveying the concept of 'most significant change' to villagers, which made it virtually impossible for them to collect useful stories.

A second issue surrounding the quality of data capture in MSC is the likely level of integrity of the reported stories. Interestingly, field staff in Laos reported that the stories from village chiefs were often inaccurate, claiming changes they expected the field staff to be happy with rather than reporting the real situation at hand. This experience points to an overarching issue with data capture in MSC: the need for sufficient trust between the informant and the data source. This trust is crucial to obtaining a shared meaning regarding the changes that have occurred in a villager's life. The inherent power imbalance present in the relationship between a field staff member and a villager works against this dynamic (Chambers, 1994), resulting in a need for staff to consciously 'befriend' villagers they talk to, act with deference and respect, and maintain good relations within the community as a whole. One potential method to overcome this particular complexity of the MSC technique in the Lao context might have been to engage community members closely involved in the projects to collect stories. Although such an approach would then be fraught with the difficulty of training the community members in interviewing techniques, it might well provide stories of greater integrity than those collected by field staff.

The MSC technique has a built-in verification process that attempts to overcome the above concerns about honesty in the stories and is successful in doing so to a certain extent. This verification process entails checking the accuracy of a selection of stories collected. As part of the external evaluation in Laos, several stories were verified. Although the contents were accurate, many interesting and insightful details had been left out of the original stories. This raises other important issues concerning the appropriate length of an MSC story, the associated level of detail reported, and also the taken-as-given assumptions of the teller and writer of the story, who may well omit details that are in fact pertinent to a different readership of the story. In Laos, an aid that to some extent helped with these issues was a clearly defined template for story capture. This template contained prompts for the different types of information required and thereby assisted the data capture process, though not fully overcoming issues of story length and detail.

Ethical concerns also arose in the process of data capture. Staff found that the most unobtrusive method of collecting quality stories was through relaxed conversation, leading slowly and gently to the question of the 'most significant change' and its significance to the villager. What this often meant, however, was a lack of transparency about what they were doing. In many cases they did not let the villager know that they were collecting a story, which in turn would be documented and be read and discussed by various members of the organization, and might even be sent overseas to the donor organization. The ethics of such a lack of transparency is questionable, and does not respect the rights of villagers. This raises the need to train

field staff in the ethics of social research methods, and to find ways to both inform the villager, and yet not alarm them into silence or apprehension—not a simple task.

All of these issues impacted on M&E compliance in the Lao use of MSC. The quality of the stories captured was affected by the ability of field staff to approach potential data sources; their ability to question without directing answers; their ability to listen; their ability to interpret; and their ability to document the stories accurately. Even highly qualified and skilled social researchers are likely to encounter problems in any of these steps. In addition, the ethics of collecting personal stories means that staff must make sure villagers understand that they are providing information and give their consent for the information to be used for monitoring purposes. These factors suggest that the apparent simplicity of the MSC technique belies a deeper complexity that must be appreciated to ensure high quality data capture.

Analysis

The analysis stage of the M&E Data Cycle involves the attribution of meaning to raw captured data¹. Crawford (2004) suggests that the predominant constraint at this stage of the M&E Data Cycle is the *skill* of those tasked with carrying out the analysis. Within many conventional M&E methods the skills required involve content analysis or statistical analysis to draw out meaningful features and trends in the captured data. Within the MSC technique, ‘analysis’ occurs through a hierarchical selection process whereby stories are read and debated by groups of staff or stakeholders. Each group selects a small number of what they consider to be stories demonstrating the most significant changes reported, and passes these to the subsequent group in the hierarchy. The group’s reason for making the choice is articulated and appended to the ‘winning’ story.

In contrast to many conventional M&E methods where the required skills are those concerned with managing data, the MSC technique requires skills in managing group decision-making, and also hinges on participation in the process. The intention of the group decision-making process is to reach consensus concerning which story of change is most significant; however, voting is sometimes required. Davies and Dart (2005) recently proposed a range of decision-making processes, explaining the advantages and disadvantages of each.

The debate and selection process is clearly contingent on the attendance and participation of group members in decision-making. In Laos, although attendance at monthly meetings was voluntary, meetings to read and select stories were mostly well attended at the field staff and project management committee levels. It seems that the personal ‘real-life’ nature of stories made the meetings interesting to staff. Attendance at selection meetings at the agency management level in the central office in the capital, Vientiane, tended to be more problematic. Full attendance and engagement at the selection meetings at all levels is crucial to the analysis process, since it is a group process. The group cannot take into account the views and values of those who are not present. Further, absent members do not benefit from the learning that arises from the debate and selection process.

¹ Checkland and Holwell (1998) discuss the conversion of ‘data’ to ‘information’ and ultimately to ‘knowledge’ involving the human act of ‘meaning attribution’.

Different problems arose in the analysis process at the field versus the country office level. The main challenge reported in Laos at the field staff and project management committee levels was the time intensity of the task of reading large numbers of stories, which sometimes took one or two days. One solution would be to limit the number of stories submitted, thereby adding a personal selection process prior to the group selection process. At the agency management level in the central office, the challenges faced were slightly different. They included factors that affected the decision making process such as dominating personalities in the discussion and power imbalances within the group. This problem could be amended through more formal facilitation of the group, without losing the great value of informal discussion and debate about the stories.

A few important issues surround the group decision-making process from which useful lessons may be learnt. Firstly, translation from stories transcribed in Lao to English was necessary for those stories to be read in the central office. This was both a considerable burden to those field staff with an ability to translate as the workload involved was high, and also resulted in loss of quality or integrity of the data prior to its analysis. Nuances in stories that may have been very significant were lost. This is a problem with no easy answers, which requires pragmatics in terms of how much material requires translation, and potentially the use of a skilled external translator.

Secondly, taking meeting minutes of the decision-making process and the reasons for the selections was found to be challenging. The discussion that takes place is dynamic and what is documented is inevitably only a summary. Since the idea is to reveal values held by the group by documenting reasons for story selection, it is an extremely important part of the process. This may be overcome by allocating sufficient time for the documentation process within the meeting agenda.

Thirdly, literature on the MSC technique does not prescribe a method to deal with stories that are not selected. A formal process to capture 'negative stories' has the potential to engender additional organisation learning, and to ensure that all identified risks are appropriately responded to in the field². One suggestion from Lao was to use the collated negative stories to guide monitoring visits by management staff in the field.

Guidance on the MSC technique stipulates involvement (at a minimum) of people with line management responsibility in relation to those who have forwarded MSC stories, and cautions against involving beneficiaries in the selection process due to the unethical imposition of unpaid time (Davies and Dart 2005). While we agree with this concern, we argue that there may be considerable value from having a community discuss and debate which changes they believe are most significant. The benefits of this might include a focus on, and learning about, the community's preferred social development future. Disparities between a community's view of a most significant change and an aid organisation's view of most significant change are likely to be highlighted and may inform mutual learning. In Laos, the experience showed these benefits to be evident. Given that the most recent evolutions in development practice rotate around increasing both community control over their future, and increased

² Crawford (2005) proposes a method to accumulate these 'negative stories' ('development risks') called the "MSD technique" (i.e. Most Significant Development-risk).

learning about community values, beliefs and needs (Kaplan 1999), there is significant potential in adopting this approach, provided the ethical considerations of time and involvement are given attention.

Dissemination

The dissemination stage of the M&E Data Cycle concerns the mechanisms/protocols by which analysed M&E data is supplied to stakeholders. Crawford (2004) identifies that both feedback and 'feedforward' are critical to successful dissemination. Both of these processes are central to implementation of the MSC technique. In the case of the MSC technique, what is important is the system to enable selected stories (and the reasons for their selection) to move from one level to another within the organisational hierarchy: field staff to and from project management committee; project management committee to and from agency management; and finally, agency management to and from the donor.

In Laos, the mechanics of the dissemination process was handled by a single person with responsibility for this task; and this approach appeared to work well³. The dissemination mechanism also included a system for channelling feedback from management back to field staff concerning the winning stories selected, the reasons for selection, and management's views on the implementation measures suggested by field staff to respond to issues arising in the stories. Problems encountered were that feedback information did not always reach all the field staff, and the selections made and reasons given were not formally reviewed by field teams.

Dissemination of information gathered through the use of MSC into other monitoring and evaluation processes was not formalised, which puts a limit on how widely the information captured and analysed was able to be used for organizational learning at a strategic level. Recommendations were made in Laos for formal integration of the MSC system with other monitoring systems and evaluation processes such that in particular the 'negative domain' stories could be systematically followed up during other monitoring operations.

Utilisation

Crawford (2004) argues that utilisation is the *raison d'être* of M&E. In other words, unless M&E findings are put to use for accountability and learning, their identification, capture, analysis and dissemination represents a waste of organisational resources. For utilisation to take place, analysed M&E data must be disseminated to the appropriate stakeholders ('data clients') in an accurate, relevant and timely manner. Further, the *incentives* for data clients to utilise the disseminated information must be apparent to them. If there is no incentive or evident need for the information, then it is likely to remain in its abstract form, and hence fail to contribute to accountability or learning. In the Laos context, there existed three obvious pathways for utilisation of the MSC information: firstly, to inform adjustments to project implementation; secondly, to facilitate individual knowledge and development through the debate and discussion at selection meetings; and thirdly, to inform future project design and organisational learning. The lesson's learnt from how each of these utilisation processes transpired in Laos is described below.

³ An alternate approach is described by Crawford (2005) who uses an 'e-M&E system' with functionality that assists the administration of the MSC technique.

In terms of adjustments to project implementation, it was observed that the adjustments field staff made to project implementation were lacking in coherence, occurred haphazardly or not at all. It would appear then, that the apparent incentives were absent. Such incentives would be provided by administering explicit accountability for these follow-up actions, which was not the case. A system that tracked adjustments and the subsequent results is warranted, both for accountability and also for learning purposes. An intrinsically motivated incentive might also arise from staff commitment to their organisation's mission however, this aspect is far more nebulous and difficult to ensure. Related to the issue of adjusting project implementation is the need for the initial design of the project being monitored by MSC to be flexible enough to accommodate implementation changes based on the information received. In Laos, the team was fortunate in that the funds provided were managed largely at the discretion of ADRA Laos, enabling flexibility to respond to some of the stories of change. One precaution should be stated here though, and that is the need for clear justification concerning how an individual 'story' is used as the basis for changing project plans or approaches, since this is potentially extrapolation of a single incident to a wider context.

With regard to the development of individual knowledge that occurs through the group dialogue and story selection process it seemed from the Lao experience that this presents the most profound utilisation of MSC data. The very process of debating the significance of stories of change fostered an organisational culture of reflection. Staff reported feeling a greater focus on the broad purpose of their work and engaged in deeper thought concerning what is meant by 'development'. In this case, the incentive appears to be an intrinsically motivated desire to be effective. In terms of encouraging attendance at meetings, the stories themselves seem to be sufficient incentive for field staff. At the agency management level, perhaps additional incentives are needed to ensure that the task of debating and selecting stories is given the importance it deserves.

In terms of informing future project design, it seems that while there may be an accumulation of tacit knowledge among staff participating in the MSC technique, in Laos there was no formal means by which the learning arising from the process can influence future project design. Given the time-bound and budget-constrained nature of aid projects, more work is needed to explore how the learning that arises from individual projects can be made available more broadly within agencies.

Assessment

Regular assessment of the MSC system is crucial to its evolution and utility within an organisation. Crawford (2004) suggests that the predominant constraint to assessment of M&E systems is an *enabling organisational culture*. Assessment of any M&E system (including the MSC technique) takes time and effort, and only an organisation committed to on-going learning and improvement will likely value this investment. In addition, it is conceptually challenging in terms of delineating what exactly should be assessed—monitoring and evaluation of monitoring and evaluation! Further, the issue of what resources can be committed to the process must be resolved.

The implementation of the MSC technique in Laos was a pilot, and therefore its implementation was closely assessed in an on-going manner and also at the end of the

pilot term. During its operation, the following variables were monitored: representativeness of target villages in stories submitted; compliance of field staff in terms of who wrote how many stories; whose stories were selected; and attendance at selection meetings. Two areas that lacked monitoring have already been mentioned: In terms of dissemination, no monitoring was done as to whether field staff were informed of management level decisions and views in selecting stories and responding to suggested project implementation changes. In terms of utilisation, no monitoring took place as to whether project implementation suggestions had actually been carried out. These would both be useful additions to on-going monitoring of the MSC system.

In terms of evaluation, there are many approaches that might be taken to assessing the 'worth' of the MSC system and investigating possible improvements. In Laos, the terms of reference for the external evaluation included reviewing the efficiency, efficacy and effectiveness of the MSC system, and its replicability for other agency contexts. In more detail, the questions to which answers were sought were:

- **Efficiency:** how well MSC was implemented using the resources and time available, and how the benefits of MSC compared with the cost.
- **Efficacy:** to what extent the defined purposes of using MSC were achieved⁴.
- **Effectiveness:** to what extent the use of MSC enabled ADRA Laos to facilitate program improvement.
- **Replicability:** to what extent differences in context, staffing, programs and donor requirements might limit the ability of other organisations to replicate ADRA Laos's use of MSC.

These evaluative questions generated useful discussion within the agency and provided significant insight to the organisation about how it might continue to evolve and develop the MSC system designed in the pilot both to address concerns raised and to improve its effectiveness.

An Enabling Context for its Use

In addition to the practical issues described above with reference to the M&E Data Cycle, the Lao experience highlighted four broad enabling contextual factors important to successful implementation of the MSC technique. These four factors were support from senior management; the commitment of a leader in the organisation to the process; the development of a trust between field staff and villagers; and finally, an organisational culture that prioritises learning and reflection.

Firstly, support for the venture was needed at the senior management level of the organisation. Within ADRA Laos the initiative was well supported, receiving individual funding through a special grants scheme for innovative projects. In reflecting on the experience, the staff involved with the pilot identified this element of senior management support as critical, and strongly recommend that any implementation of the MSC technique be specifically budgeted, rather than simply accommodating it more generally within project management expenses. As mentioned above, an area where stronger support from senior management would have been appreciated was attendance at selection meetings. Senior management participation in

⁴ These purposes included: i) increasing participation of stakeholders in M&E; ii) developing analytical skills of field staff; iii) improving ADRA Laos' ability to determine overall impact of projects; and iv) improving their project management.

these meetings demonstrates a valuing of the work done by field staff, without which it is difficult to sustain morale. A third aspect to the necessary commitment of senior management concerns ongoing staff training. It was clear that although staff had been trained in interview techniques and how to document stories, some staff remained confused, requiring continued mentoring.

Secondly, the commitment and perseverance of a leader was identified as critical to the success of the MSC pilot in Laos. As a novel M&E method, it required sustained input in terms of training, motivating and ensuring staff compliance, collating and organising stories, arranging selection meetings, monitoring the pilot and organising the external evaluation. In the Laos context, the fundamental differences between the MSC technique and conventional monitoring methods meant that some concepts were at first difficult for field staff to grasp. But more than maintaining the logistics of the MSC system, it emerged that the leader must have a deep understanding of MSC's capabilities and limitations, and enthusiasm to encourage others to invest their time and energy in trialling it with an open mind. Further research is needed to compare MSC with conventional monitoring systems in terms of costs and benefits to help agencies make clear decisions about the instances when the use of MSC is justified.

Thirdly, given the requirement for community engagement in providing accurate stories of change, the Laos experience suggests that a warm and communicative relationship between field staff and villagers is critical. In Laos, there was considerable contrast between the two projects that piloted the MSC technique. One project was designed with close community interaction including repeated visits and contact with the communities. In this situation, story collection proved relatively easy. The other project was designed differently, with less community interaction, and proved more difficult to foster openness and divulgence of real life experiences and opinions. It seems that successful story capture requires field staff to minimize power asymmetries that might prevent community members from speaking openly.

Finally, clear aims, and an organisational culture that values organisational learning and self-reflection is paramount. MSC can uncover unexpected changes along with those that might have been anticipated, and as such, demands an audience receptive to assimilating and responding to new and potentially surprising information. Without such an openness to learn and respond, the value of the MSC technique is likely to be eroded. In fact, from the outset, an organisation should be very clear about why they are implementing the MSC technique. ADRA Laos defined a series of aims for using the technique, based on their initial reading and understanding of the system, and these proved valuable in directing its use. However, one aim, "to measure overall impact", was inconsistent with the capabilities of the MSC technique. While MSC may promote insights into project impact, its structure does not focus on, or answer questions about, overall project impact. An evaluation seeking to investigate the average experience of beneficiaries is required for this purpose, rather than extraordinary events such as those recorded in stories of change. This point highlights a danger of over-interpretation of the information collected using MSC, and a need to focus on the use of the information for reflective, learning processes rather than making claims about attribution and project effectiveness. Such claims could however be made if adjunct methods with appropriate validity criteria were utilised in addition to MSC.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have reviewed the many and important lessons arising from the evaluation of a pilot of the MSC technique, our purpose being to contribute to discussion and evolution of this increasingly popular technique, and to inform its practical implementation. The pilot of the MSC technique within two NGO projects implemented in Laos has been systematically reviewed in the light of a conceptual model of M&E practicalities, the M&E Data Cycle. The lessons reported confirm that each stage of the M&E Data Cycle presents potential challenges for agencies wishing to use the MSC technique and highlights that the apparent simplicity of the technique hides a deeper complexity that agencies should appreciate. Equally, the many benefits attributed to the use of the technique, and the high level of enthusiasm within ADRA Laos for MSC warrants others to examine what this innovative monitoring might offer their organisation.

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