

IMPLEMENTING THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE
TECHNIQUE FOR MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF SOCIAL
AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE PROGRAMME: PROCESS,
OUTCOMES AND LESSONS LEARNT

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Implementing the Most Significant Change technique for monitoring and evaluation of social and behaviour change programme: process, outcomes and lessons learnt

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Abstract

The 'Most Significant Change' technique is increasingly gaining popularity among project/programme managers as a qualitative Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation method. The technique involves collection of 'Significant Change' stories of the clients in a programme/project and then selection of changes considered as Most Significant by the clients in a multistage process. With focus on changes considered as significant by the clients, Most Significant Change Technique gets distinguished from other Monitoring and Evaluation Techniques as it enables assessment of indirect outcomes of a programme/project that usually are not captured by conventional indicator-based Monitoring and Evaluation systems or other techniques of Participatory Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation.

Since 2008, UNICEF India has been implementing the Most Significant Change technique in its Social and Behavior Change Programmes in India. With “Communication for Development” perspective, the programmes looks at Behavior Change Communication as a vehicle for Social Change. MSC technique has been employed in the programmes as a qualitative participatory monitoring and evaluation technique alongside the conventional indicator based monitoring systems. The technique is employed to provide insights into the direct and indirect outcomes incidental to programme implementation.

This paper is based on experiences in implementation of the technique. It discusses the implementation processes adopted, the analysis paradigm and outcomes being reflected by analyses of the Most Significant Change stories. It also delineates lessons learnt from the implementation experience that provide a feed-forward for large-scale implementation of the technique

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INTRODUCTION

The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. Also, known as Monitoring without Indicators, the technique was developed by Rick Davies and Jessica Dart in 2005. The process involves collection of Significant Change (SC) stories emanating from the field, and the systematic selection of the most significant of these stories by panels of designated stakeholders or staff (Davies and Dart 2005). The designated staff and stakeholders are initially involved by 'searching' for project impact. Once changes have been captured, various people sit down together, read the stories aloud and have in-depth discussions about the value of these reported changes. When the technique is implemented successfully, whole teams of people begin to focus their attention on program impact. The MSC technique arose from a need to overcome the inadequacies of conventional monitoring processes, in situations where programme impacts are difficult to quantify, and where a focus on learning, not merely accountability, is desirable. Such situations include programmes that are complex and result in diverse outcomes, ones that are large in size, and those that focus on social change (Davies and Dart 2005).

Conventional monitoring methods use prescriptive criteria to verify achievement of defined project goal, objectives, and outputs (Broughton and Hampshire 1997; Cracknell 2000; Coleman 1987). These criteria are generally established by programme designers, rather than participants or beneficiaries (Crawford and Bryce 2003). The result is sometimes a focus on the mechanics of project implementation, 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). The Most Significant Change technique facilitates project and programme improvement by focusing the direction of work away from less-valued directions towards more fully shared visions and explicitly valued directions. It can also help uncover important, valued outcomes not initially specified. It delivers these benefits by creating space for stakeholders to reflect, and by facilitating dynamic dialogue. Where projects and programmes have diverse and complex outcomes with multiple stakeholders groups—MSC enriches summative evaluation with unexpected outcomes (Davis and Dart 2005).

MSC IN UNICEFS SBCC

The Social and Behavior Change Communication (SBCC) Programme of the UNICEF is being implemented in 16 identified Child-friendly districts of 11 states in India. The districts have been identified for full convergence of various sectoral programmes. SBCC activities in the districts are centered on three

inter-related approaches of- reaching families and communities directly, community dialogue and social mobilization. SBCC is targeted at changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices to influence individual behaviour, as well as key social factors that influence behaviours.

In these select districts, the focus of the SBCC programme is on achievement of the following four behaviours:

- Exclusive breastfeeding for six months: Mothers initiate breastfeeding within one hour of giving birth, and practice exclusive breastfeeding for six months.
- Hand washing with soap: Caregivers and children wash their hands with soap after defecation and before handling food.
- Girl's education: Parents enroll their girls in Class 1 when they reach the age of five and ensure they complete primary education.
- HIV and AIDS: Sexually active young people already engaged in risk behaviours adequately protect themselves.

The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique is being used as a qualitative, participatory method for Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of the SBCC programme. The technique being a qualitative stakeholder-centered process; is expected to capture the multi-dimensional aspects of change that may not get captured through conventional M&E systems. The key objectives of adopting the technique are:

- To ascertain results of the programme as perceived to be significant by the stakeholders
- To complement the indicators-based quantitative system by providing qualitative insights into the changes
- To develop insights into the process of behavior change and factors influencing the same

IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

The first step in implementation of MSC was defining the domains of change; these being broad categories of possible changes. Stories of changes in these domains were to be collected and analyzed for ascertaining programme results and outcomes. With a bi-annual reporting period, the four key behaviors targeted through the SBCC programme were defined as the four domains. A three-step implementation approach was followed for operationalizing MSC.

Capacity Development Phase

The first phase was of knowledge augmentation and skill development of the

implementation partners of the BCC programme for MSC implementation. This was done at two levels- orientation of key-decision makers and capability development of field functionaries for MSC implementation.

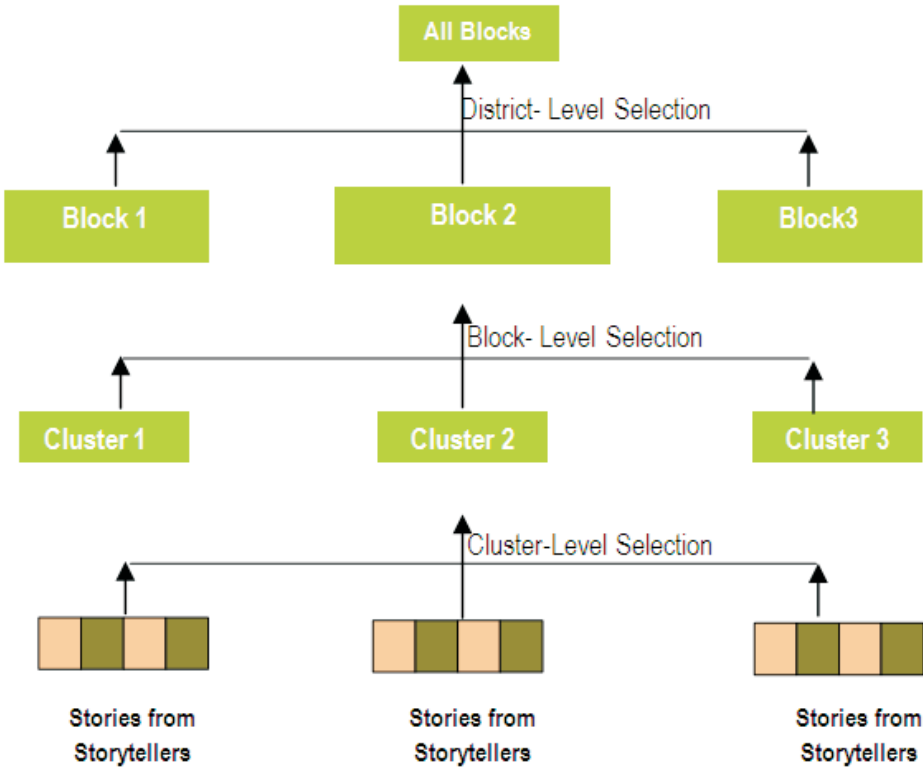
In the programme area, client-level programme implementation is being facilitated by local Civil Society Organizations (CSO). Along with these, the key local government departments of Health, Women and Child, School Education etc. are also partners in the implementation process. With participation of these key stakeholders considered as important for MSC implementation, orientation programmes were organized across the implementation districts for sensitizing them on the technique and their role in implementation; especially selection of most-significant change stories. Orientation programmes for departmental functionaries of the said departments at village-level, and the administrative units of blocks and districts were conducted. For skill augmentation of the client-level implementation personnel of the partner CSOs, training programmes were designed and implemented across the states. These training programmes focused on developing a shared understanding of the MSC technique among the field-personnel and development of requisite skills for story collection and selection. This was quintessential as the process involves collection and selection of stories within wide boundaries and without a proper orientation towards the method, story collection and selection may get diverted from monitoring and evaluation perspective view. Participatory training methods were adopted for achieving the envisaged training outcomes. A detailed training manual and a short-film on MSC were developed as learning aids to facilitate both trainings as well as implementation. Detailed implementation guidelines were developed to serve as a handy reference for actual field implementation as well harmonizing implementation across the states.

System Development phase

Selection of stories by the stakeholders is what differentiates MSC from other techniques of participatory monitoring and evaluation. And therefore the next-phase was of system development for story collection and selection. System design initiatives were then undertaken based on the implementation guidelines.

While the primary responsibility of identification and collection of stories of significant change was assigned to the field personnel of the partner CSOs, a multi-level selection process was designed for selecting most-significant change stories. After the collections, the first-level of selection was that of the village, where clients sit together to deliberate and select the story of most-significant change. At the next-level, most-significant change stories collected from a cluster of villages are put for selection to a committee with representation

of various stakeholders having a perspective of the cluster. Similarly, at the block and district-level,



participation of stakeholders was solicited for selection of MSC stories emanating from the preceding level. At a given level, a typical selection committee comprised of representatives from partner departments, Community-Based Organizations (CBO), citizen groups and institution of local governance (Panchyat Raj Institutions). The system is schematically illustrated in the adjoining figure.

The selection process was facilitated by the CSO personnel at the designated level. Criteria for selection are mutually agreed upon and a transparent process is followed for arriving at the 'most-significant change' story.

A system for verification was also developed so as to ensure correctness of facts and authenticity of the events depicted in the stories. The stories were verified before being presented at the block level. The story collectors, writers and the narrators were contacted by block level implementing personnel for verification of the stories.

Operationalization phase

The developed system was more or less adopted by the implementing states with minor variation. These modifications were in terms of another layer in the selection process after the village-level and (i.e. the Panchayat-level) and doing away with the cluster level process or starting the selection at the Cluster-level. Similarly, professional storywriters were also engaged for story writing in a state.

Analyses of stories were being used for repositioning programmatic interventions and focal areas. For example, meta monitoring of stories in one of the states indicated very few instances of significant changes in a marginalized community (a primitive tribal group). This led to intensification of programme activities in the settlements inhabited by these marginalized groups.

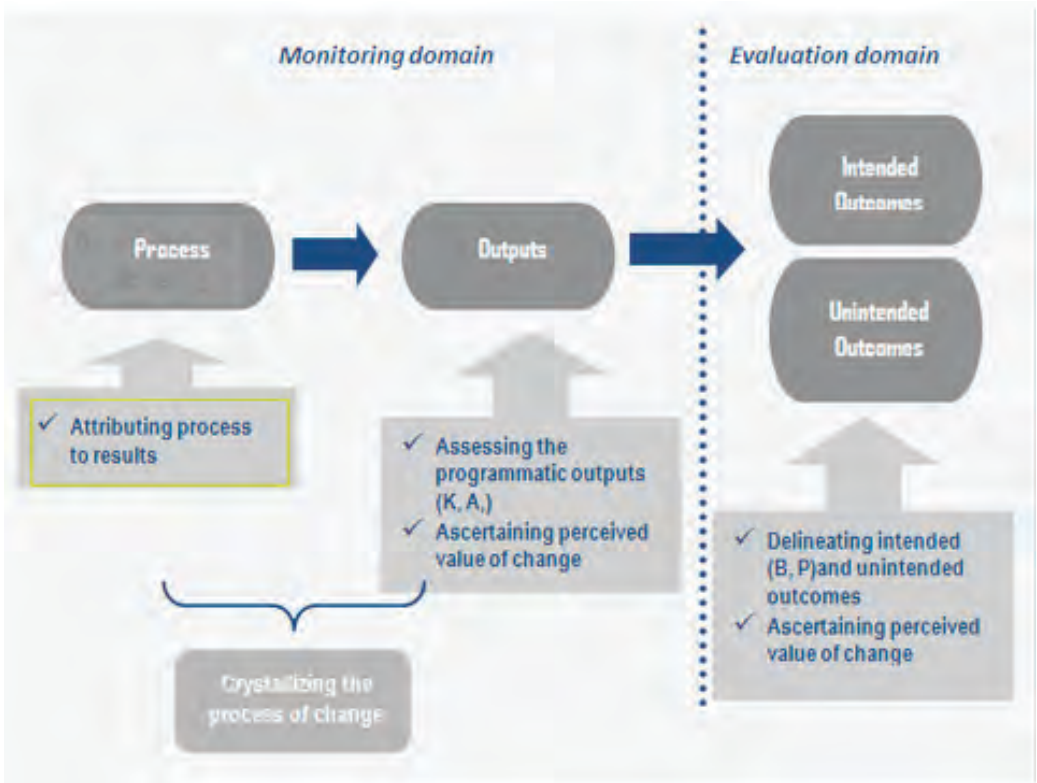
STORY ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

MSC is the PM&E technique that facilitates capturing changes that are perceived significant by the clients. The added value of the technique is in describing changes from the perspective of clients and those that are valued by the clients. This is in addition to the programmatic changes as envisaged in the programme design. Also, the technique facilitates monitoring function by aiding delineate results and processes contributing thereto; and evaluating outcomes both intended and unintended. This premise has been used to develop the content analysis framework and thereby facilitating concurrent monitoring and evaluation function.

At the first step, the MSC stories were analysed in the **monitoring domain**. This entailed analyzing stories for **immediate behavior change results** (outputs) as envisaged by the programme designed. The changes in knowledge, attitude and behaviour levels in the clients were **enumerated**. First the changes in this level were analysed and then the changes considered as **most significant** were defined detailing the **perceived values** of the changes. This helped in identifying the values associated with the results being perceived as significant. At the next step, analyses were for establishing the incidence of results to the programmatic activities i.e. the processes. This becomes the key for monitoring as it facilitated repositioning of programmatic interventions and fine-tuning activities so as to maximize results.

Based on the process-result causality, the next step was for analyzing the **behavior change process** itself. Analysis of the change process was done so as to crystallize the behavior change process and develop a better understanding of

the same. Analysis here was for ascertaining the **reinstating forces** enabling the changes process and the **restraining forces** restricting the change process that needs to be overcome for facilitating the desired change. **Force-Field** analysis was done of the stories for analyzing the process.



In the evaluation domain, the first level of analysis was for identifying the **intended programmatic outcomes** (change in practices) and the **unintended outcomes** emanating out of the interventions. Thus, these outcomes at the individual, household and community-level were enumerated first. At the next level, **most significant outcomes** as perceived by the clients were described. As is the case in analysis of results, **values associated with the significant changes** were delineated.

Analysis on the aforementioned parameters facilitated the PM&E functions of the programme. The analyses and interpretations of the analyses provided critical insights into the programme such that the needs and perspectives of the clients could be harmonized with programme delivery.

RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

The programme intervention envisages behaviour change to take place at all the four basic stages of change - knowledge, attitude, behavior and practice. An overview of the significant changes described in the selected stories suggests representation of all the four stages of behaviour change with varying proportions across different domains.

Early Breast Feeding

The stories reflect that because of the SBCC interventions, the knowledge levels and beliefs associated with Early Initiation and exclusive breast-feeding have undergone changes. Mothers now consider colostrum as healthy and not unclean as was the earlier belief. Mothers also think that colostrum feeding is important for healthy growth of the newborn. Would be mothers are also deciding to feed colostrum and exclusively breastfeed their babies. There is also an increased awareness regarding proper diet, adequate rest, care and precautions to be taken during pregnancy.

Due to multiple messaging targeting the entire household, there are examples of increased participation of men-folk in child rearing. Also evidenced are changes in societal norms and traditions like the practice of breast feeding after 3-4 days of birth or giving honey to the newborn upon birth.

Hand washing with soap

The stories point towards change in perception of the communities regarding hand-washing. Hand-washing with soap is being considered as necessary; than just washing hands with mud/ash and water. The protagonists in the stories describe the link between unclean hands and diarrhea. The stories reflect on the belief of the mothers regarding child feces being as dangerous as adult feces. People have also started storing soap for hand-washing in the place of residence. Along with hand-washing, people in general are becoming more aware of personal hygiene, food hygiene and safe drinking water. One of the key outcomes that the stories underscore is of adopters becoming change agents and spreading the message of hand-washing with soap to others. Within the family, children are playing the key role of change agents influencing the practices within the household.

Girls Education

One of the key change that the stories capture as regards girls education is

considering education, atleast to the primary level, as equally important for girls and boys. Parents have also found out ways of taking of the household chores that usually the girls have are engaged in, so that they can send the girls to school. A key indirect outcome of the programme that is evidenced in some of the stories is of prevention of marriage before the age of 18.

HIV and AIDS

Through the programme, young people have become aware of the severity of the disease, the four modes of transmission and the measures to be taken for protecting oneself from the disease. Knowing about HIV and AIDS, people have undergone voluntary testing and also have adopted safe sexual practices. One of the key change that has been evidenced is in the form of women breaking taboos and initiating discussion on HIV and AIDs and explicitly discussing risky sexual behavior with their partners and in the community.

Cross cutting indirect outcomes

The MSC story collection process provided voice to the clients enabling them to be active participants in the programme. Through the significant change stories, the protagonists gained recognition both in and outside the villages. There is pride and a sense of achievement when even a villager's story is selected. This has led to increased confidence and many of the narrators are advocates of behavior change. Decision-making skills are enhanced through the selection processes adopted where clients come together to deliberate the significant changes and values associated while arriving at the most significant change. In fact, in the BCC programme, MSC has furthered empowerment objectives rather than performance management, accountability and learning objectives of an M&E technique.

LESSONS LEARNT

Building a supportive environment

Building a supportive environment for implementing MSC is a pre-requisite to effective implementation of the technique. Various stakeholders whose support is required include the clients, field personnel, storywriters, story selectors, key decision makers in the organization and donors. Orientation of key decision-makers is quintessential for soliciting their commitment and support in the implementation process. Similarly, motivation of the storytellers to share their experiences is also of utmost significance. An environment needs to be built where people take pride in sharing their own experiences.

Identification of significant change stories

An important question in MSC relates to the method of identifying the person whose story is to be captured. Only those who are closely associated with the community can identify the person in whom change related to a domain is evidenced. Along with programme personnel, role of CBOs and civil society groups in identification of significant change stories is very important. Client-level service providers, who are also involved with the community, also serve as an effective medium for identification of stories of significant change. Engagement of these stakeholder groups in the process of MSC implementation enhances efficacy of the process.

Integrating MSC with Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) systems

Monitoring & Evaluation is a key programme management function which has a direct bearing on the attainment of the envisioned objectives of a programme. Robust M&E frameworks and well designed M&E systems ensure efficient project management and effective result delivery. Comprehensive M&E systems need to be designed on the principles of participation, at the same time with an optimal mix of conventional and participatory systems. MSC is not designed to be a stand alone M&E technique. MSC needs to be integrated into the larger M&E framework of the programme and results needs to be examined in juxtaposition with the conventional quantitative components of the framework. The qualitative read out provided by the analysis of the MSC stories and the quantitative data emanating from conventional methods such as KAP studies, together would provide a holistic picture of progress towards programme objectives. The integration is also necessary so that the MSC story collection, selection and analyses process is systematized and does not remain a sporadic activity. This would ensure that there is continuity to the process and it becomes a part of the routine reporting, as is the case with the larger reporting protocols. This also becomes critical so that it can then provide a storyline on the change process over time.

Continuous capacity building and hand-holding

Implementation of any Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation methodology requires development of sensitivities towards the participants among the implementation personnel, backed by appropriate capacities for implementing the methodology. A relatively new technique, that is still in a development stage, requires more intensive efforts. Developing a shared understanding of MSC among the implementers, as well as communicating the philosophy of the technique is a necessary prerequisite to its implementation. More so, because MSC shifts the focus from what the programme considers “significant” to what communities and other

stakeholders consider “significant”. Well designed and focused training programmes are required to develop the requisite capacities among the story collectors, selectors and analysts. Continuous reorientation and refresher trainings are required for reinforcement, as well as trouble shooting for operational issues. This needs to be matched with real time “handholding” during the implementation process. Handholding support and demonstration for story collection, selection and analyses ensures effective transfer of learning, translating into effective implementation of the MSC processes. Performance aids in the form of story collection formats and analysis frameworks, then become complementary means for ensuring harmonization of the process across implementers, as well as handy references in other spheres of work.

Documenting values of change

The MSC selection process is a hierarchical process, with various stakeholders participating at specific levels. The array of stakeholders engaged in the process, brings the values to which these stakeholders subscribe, into the selection process. At the first level, the communities may have a set of values and consider something as most significant based on their value set. At the next levels, other stakeholders may have a different value set. While the selection at this level would reflect the values subscribed to by the stakeholders at this level, there is also a need to communicate the values of the community and why they considered the particular change in the MSC story as 'most significant'. This would then provide a reference for selectors, while they go about the selection process. A story selected at the highest level, should therefore have a trail of the values that stakeholders at various levels associated with the most significant changes, which needs to be recorded. Therefore, documenting the values of changes at every level starting from the story narrator is necessary.

Internal vs external system

As described earlier, the MSC process can be implemented in two ways. One is to have an internal system, in which the project partners identify, collect, facilitate selection and analyze the stories. The other way is the external system - to have the entire process out-sourced to an external agency which implements it completely. MSC works best in conditions where there is continuous interaction with the stakeholders. This makes the internal system a more effective system of MSC implementation. The project partners bring in their understanding of the context and appreciation of values of the stakeholders, and thus are in better position to implement the participatory technique. The rapport that the field functionaries have with the primary stakeholders, makes them more suitable options for identification of stories,

as well as eliciting the stories. Concerns about institutionalizing the system and developing institutional capacities, also necessitate implementation of MSC processes by partners. Therefore, UNICEF's experience with implementing MSC indicates that an internal system is more effective. In the case of an external system, efficiency can be enhanced by having the same agency and same team during various rounds of collection and selection. This would ensure that the agency and the personnel, over time, develop a better understanding of the context, people, and organizations, when they implement various MSC processes. The third possibility is of a mixed system where the story collection and selection processes are anchored by project partners and the analysis is outsourced to an external specialist agency. This would ensure that strengths of local partners in engaging the community and specialist technical expertise are dovetailed for effective implementation.

Way forward

With MSC being a body of knowledge being developed, knowledge sharing and dissemination would be an important intervention area. Synthesis of implementation experiences and activities for dissemination to other stakeholders at various levels is required. Also, this needs to be complemented by platforms for information exchange and accessing knowledge so that sharing between various implementers is facilitated. Active experimentation and iterations are required to enhance applicability and adaptability of the technique to various sectors and geographies. Delineation of lessons learnt and adaptive implementation process would contribute towards the knowledge building process and augmenting the body of knowledge on MSC.

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