

SBC Monitoring Guidance

Most Significant Change Technique

What is the Most Significant Change Technique?

The most significant change (MSC) technique is a participatory and complexity-aware monitoring and evaluation approach to identify key program outputs and outcomes over a project period. MSC relies on the decision of key project stakeholders and beneficiaries about what changes to record and how to analyze data. This process is iterative and provides nuanced information on project outcomes to inform the management and improvement of a program. MSC includes the collection of significant change stories from the field, the subsequent selection of the most relevant of these stories by designated stakeholders, and the verification of those change stories.

This method involves the following:

1. **Defining domains of change and reporting period.** It is important that stakeholders clearly define the different domains of change to be monitored (i.e., what is the specific change being assessed and in what distinct context did it occur?), as well as the frequency of monitoring these changes.
2. **Collecting significant change stories.** Significant change stories are collected from program participants or staff. For capacity strengthening programs, the participants might be program staff, governmental staff, or other people for whom the program was designed. They should be asked questions that gauge the most significant change they have noticed in their lives or work, how and why a change of interest occurred, and whether and how this change has taken place as a result of the project.
3. **Systematically selecting relevant stories.** Stakeholders and relevant staff should be organized in levels of hierarchy from those who will provide preliminary feedback to those who will provide final feedback. Typically, stories will be collected at the sub-district, district, and provincial or state levels. The initial level of the hierarchy, for example, the sub-district level, begins by filtering through these stories and selecting the most significant change stories within each domain of interest according to a set of clearly defined criteria. These stories and the justification for why they were selected are then passed on to the next level of stakeholders and staff. Since stories will be provided from multiple settings (e.g., multiple sub-district groups to the next level of hierarchy), there will be too many stories to pass up the hierarchy. Therefore, stakeholders and staff will select a subset of selected stories and pass them on to the next level, and so on. This process will continue over time as stories are continually fed through the hierarchy during the monitoring or evaluation process.



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



U.S. President's Malaria Initiative



**Breakthrough
ACTION**
FOR SOCIAL & BEHAVIOR CHANGE



4. **Verification.** These selected stories should be verified by visiting the sites mentioned to check that stories are accurate and to gather more information if needed, including what has occurred since the event was documented. Stories can be verified through, for example, consultation with key informants, relevant project managers and external partners, or program documentation.
5. **Verification.** These selected stories should be verified by visiting the sites mentioned to check that stories are accurate and to gather more information if needed, including what has occurred since the event was documented. Stories can be verified through, for example, consultation with key informants, relevant project managers and external partners, or program documentation.
6. **Producing a document for funders.** After this process has run for some time, such as a year, a document should be produced that contains the stories ultimately selected at the highest level of the stakeholder/staff hierarchy, as well as the justification for these selections. This document is given to program funders and should be shared as feed back to the project managers and relevant staff.
7. **Quantification.** At this stage, both explicit quantitative data, as well as qualitative data that can be quantified, are collected from the stories. For example, the monitoring team can quantify where the most significant changes have occurred or what types of changes have occurred the most. They can also assess where the most significant changes are occurring most frequently, and with what populations, to identify trends and highlight gaps and opportunities for future programmatic efforts.
8. **Implications, dissemination, and improvements.** This final stage requires critically determining the implications of the findings gathered from MSC, packaging the findings into a digestible format, disseminating findings and implications to relevant stakeholders, and making necessary improvements both to the monitoring process as well as to the program.

When Should You Use the Most Significant Change Technique?

The MSC technique is effective only if a monitoring and evaluation team has buy-in from, and the help and engagement of, relevant stakeholders, staff, beneficiaries, and funders. As this process requires external participation, time, and input, it will be successful only if these individuals have the time and commitment needed to maintain the rigor of this monitoring method. This method is ideal for programs that are large and have many organizational layers or levels, as MSC involves a whittling process that requires the input of various levels of an organization's or program's hierarchy. Finally, this method is best suited for programs that are complex, producing varied and evolving outcomes of interest. If a program is simple, with easily defined outcomes, quantitative monitoring methods may be sufficient and less resource intensive. However, in a more complex programmatic environment, MSC will prove superior to conventional quantitative monitoring methods as it will better allow evaluation of program impacts in a complex environment that is difficult to preemptively quantify.



- Helps identify and explain any unexpected changes or outcomes.
- Helps clearly identify and determine the most salient values and outcomes of a program.
- Can build buy-in, engagement, capacity, and cooperation of staff, stakeholders, and funding sources.

- Has potential bias toward success. Teams may be more inclined to focus only on positive outcomes.
- May allow potential subjectivity in selection process, leading to selection of participants who excel at telling stories, express more popular views, or represent a specific subgroup. (This can be mitigated with a solid set of criteria to guide most significant change stories.)
- Requires the time and participation of various beneficiaries, stakeholders, and staff, which they may not have.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for the MSC are similar to those for in-depth interviews. It is essential to obtain the consent of the participant to conduct and record significant change stories. Additionally, any information collected should be made unidentifiable. This means that any justification for why stakeholders, beneficiaries, and staff chose specific significant change stories must be de-identified if shared with the public. Additionally, consent should be obtained from each stakeholder, beneficiary, and staff to use and share their justifications with the internal MSC team. Participants should also be informed that they are not required to answer questions if they do not want to.

Resources

[The Most Significant Change Technique](#)

This document from the Asian Development Bank provides a slightly more in-depth look at the MSC technique which provides a simple and easy-to-understand breakdown of the MSC process.

[The MSC Technique: A Guide to Its Use](#)

This guide is an extended, in-depth description and explanation of the MSC technique. This document dives deeper into the MSC technique by further describing the steps for MSC as well as additional considerations for researchers looking to fully understand this method.