Getting the Most from Most Significant Change Data Fiona Kotvojs¹, Tania Warokka², Lia Marpaung³

Introduction

What Is MSC?

Most Significant Change (MSC) is a participatory, qualitative evaluation tool particularly useful where you are looking for unexpected outcomes. While it can be used for a one-off evaluation, it is most efficient when it forms part of a change management strategy and is being regularly implemented over a long period of time.

The MSC Process

- 1. Evaluator collects data by **asking** stakeholders (known as storytellers) to identify positive or negative changes resulting from the initiative. (Figure 1)
- 2. The storyteller selects the one that was most significant change from their perspective, provides details about this in the form of a story and explains why this was the most significant change from their perspective.
- 3. A stakeholder panel discusses all of the stories and selects the one or two stories that, in their opinion, reflect the most significant change(s) resulting from the initiative. (Figure 2)
- 4. The panel identifies why they selected this story from all of those considered.

This sequence is repeated at regular intervals over the life of the initiative. Stories selected as most significant by stakeholder panels can then be grouped and considered by 'higher' level stakeholder panels. Selection, validation and reporting is conducted in the same way at these higher levels.

MSC generates a great volume of data that contributes to an evaluation. Apart from the story told, MSC also identifies some three to ten other changes identified by a storyteller,

reasons a story was selected by a panel, and lessons that can be learnt from all the stories a panel considers. This data is usually managed as a series of paper records or electronic files (often Excel or Word). More rarely, a database is used.

Why We Used a Database

Previous experience showed that without a database, data management is often a challenge for MSC; stories may not be submitted to selection panels or submitted to different panels, and data is often lost after the selection panel (Kotvojs, 2009). As a consequence, the benefits of using a dedicated database were identified and strongly recommended (Kotvojs, 2009; Lasambouw & Marpaung, 2012).



entry of data and facilitate wider stakeholder access to information. It was believed that this would improve participation and, feedback to stakeholders, and the quality of story collection.

The experience of using such a database is presented here.

MSCdatabase

We chose to use MSC database (www.mostsignificantchange.com). MSC database is a web-based database specifically designed for MSC. It allowed us to enter:

- All of the changes that a stakeholder identifies.
- The story they selected as the most significant change.
- The selection panel's reasons for selecting a story as the most significant change, and
- The overall lessons the panel identify from all the stories they read.
- Details of all stakeholders and selection panel members.
- Custom coding of this data to facilitate secondary analysis.

In addition the database allowed this data to be custom coded. This generated additional value from the secondary data thorugh extensive secondary analysis.

The database is also designed to support management of the MSC process.



5. The selected stories are validated

A web based database was seen to be preferable as it would enable decentralised 6. Feedback is provided to stakeholders supporting the change management process.

How MSC database Was Used to Support MSC

We used MSC database on four different programs:

One program for NZAID in Tokelau (a one-off evaluation collecting some 50 stories), two for AusAID in Indonesia (one was initially a one-off evaluation and the other repeated regularly over a two year period each collecting approximately 100 stories, over 300 changes and with seven to ten panels), and one globally for a private client (repeated over a two year period, each round involving 10 to 15 stories). Different teams implemented each of these evaluations.

Data Storage

In all cases, MSC database was used to store all of the data collected as part of the MSC process. This included data from the storytellers and the selection panel findings. In some cases, the data was entered in English and in others, in Indonesian.

Data Management

The evaluation teams used MSC database to identify stories that had not been allocated to a selection panel, thus ensuring all stories were considered by selection panels. Built in functions prevented a story being allocated to more than one panel at the same level. These functions also prevented allocation of a story to a higher level selection panel that had not been accepted as the most significant change at a lower level panel

Secondary Analysis of Data

(Note: since publication MSCDatabase now includes significantly enhanced secondary analyis tools including very flexible

logical combination of search conditions)

The evaluation teams developed custom codes (Figure 3a). The database allowed us to require that all data was coded against these by those entering data. In each case, the database was used to support secondary analysis of all data collected. The data for each code was exported into an excel file, translated using google translator where it had been entered in Indonesian, and then quickly analysed. In several cases, secondary analysis was undertaken after the team members returned home, across six locations in up to four different countries. Data was shared through MSCdatabase, making secondary analysis very easy.

On the evaluation undertaken in Tokelau, it was intended that NZAID would use this information for another evaluation being undertaking the following year and as part of an induction program for staff working in Tokelau. To maximize efficiency, all this data was coded when entered to enable it to be extracted and used in the following evaluation. Unfortunately, due to 100% turnover of NZAID staff and consequent loss of corporate memory, this data was not used in the subsequent evaluation nor for inductions.

Automatic Generation of Selection Panel Materials

The evaluation team used MSC database to automatically generate the information provided to selection panel members for their consideration and the draft text for



Figure 3b - Analysis page in MSCdatabase; enabled us to quickly perform extensive secondary analysis of all MSC stories & other changes against the domains and categories defined in the project setup.

Main Benefits Found With MSC database

Ease of Use

MSC database Secondary Analysis Showed:

against which all stories and changes were assigned. Multiple

story panel levels could also be defined

Facilitated More Flexible MSC Training On each of these applications, the M&E team identified that what they most liked about

MSC database was "user friendliness and that it is easy to access". Each team found the On two programs, the analysis of the MSC data formed part of an on-the-job training logic and flow of the structure to be almost self-evident. As a result, within half an hour of first using the database, teams were able to enter data and extract data for analysis.

Easier Data Management

The support MSC database provided to managing the selection panel process was also seen as a major benefit.

Added Value from Secondary Analysis & Significant Time Savings

The custom category coding system for stories was very quick to use. MSCdatabase enabled us to extract data related to each code separately (Figure 3b). This allowed us to carry out extensive secondary analysis that would have been impossible in practise without a customised database system.

Given the time constraints, this proved to be critical and enabled secondary analysis of all data, thus extracting more value from the significant time that is spent collecting MSC stories.

"The database saved us so much time" was a common comment on all programs.

The following sentiments expressed by one evaluator was typical to all ...

"We could not have done MSC on this scale without the database. If we didn't have the database we would have had to collect fewer stories, run less selection panels, and the only analysis undertaken would have been what the selection panel did; or, we would need to have had more members on the team. The database was really helpful"

Web Access Facilitated Easy Collaborative Working

Being web-based, evaluation team members were able to access the database regardless of where they were. As team-members were often in different countries when secondary analysis occurred, they saw this as a major advantage enabling all team members to participate in data analysis, regardless of their location.

the Indonesian team as they learnt regardless of the advisor's location. The ability to break coding down into discrete elements, easily check coding and extract data by code also assisted in the learning process; this enabled us to practice one part of the analysis process at a time and expand the complexity as the competency of the team increased

program. The web based nature of the database enabled the M&E Advisor to support

Data Persistence and Security

The evaluation teams felt that the data was kept in a more systematic and organized manner through use of MSC database. The structure of the database facilitated the entry of all data attached to a particular storyteller. This minimised the likelihood of data being lost which gave each team confidence of the capture of all collected data.

The structure was particularly critical on one program for which MSC was twice placed on hold during the evaluation. This delay adversely impacted program evaluation, however as all MSC data was systematically recorded in the database, data was not lost. As a result, it was very easy to minimize

[the typical comment was]... "The database provides security and protects our data from being lost or damaged"

adverse consequences of the delay when MSC implementation recommenced. Without the database, it is likely that data would have been lost during this period and the evaluation could not have been efficiently resumed.

In environments where back-ups (let alone off-site back-ups) and virus checking are not routinely conducted, the fact that MSC database did this automatically gave the evaluation teams a great deal of confidence.

That District and Provincial officials were now recognising that:

- I. Implementing recruitment of Principals based on competence and capability begins with the commitment from each individual to make changes.
- 2. Support from various stakeholders is an important factor in the successful implementation of Regulation.
- 3. Implementation of the Strategic Plan regulations relies heavily on the availability of qualified people with clear responsibility to implement it.

That through the evaluation the community had learned that:

- 1. Sometimes we don't communicate as much as we should about the issues that concern us all in the village.
- 2. We take things for granted; we don't always question some of our actions and the impacts they have on our community (for example, the number of fizzy drinks that come in from outside). We need to think about and observe the changes that are taking place in our community as a result of our actions, and then make appropriate decisions as a result.
- 3. Each individual in our village has different priorities and views. Everyone has particular issues that are significant or important to them and their families that we must recognise;
- It is important to gain the public's understanding on development issues in our community and Tokelau. At the moment it is mainly the Taupulega (leaders) who make the decisions and are aware of the choices that are part of this process of decision-making. We need to create a better medium for getting input from the public, informing the public of the decisions that are made, and how these decisions were arrived at, both at the village and national levels; and
- 5. To solve these problems we need more training and support for the Taupulega and senior management. While the Taupulega may have been good at traditional village management, the new responsibilities in terms of health and education may be beyond our current capacity.

"Unlike my previous experiences of MSC, using MSCdatabase ensured all stories only went to one panel, only selected stories went to higher level panels, and no stories were missed! This was great".

Weaknesses of Using MSC database

Note: since publication the cost of MSC database has changed, it is now accessible on a monthly cost basis and at a lower rate, there are a range of options and the developers now provide a free usage tier to support MSC usage for small projects, with limited budgets)

The initial cost of MSC database was perceived as a weakness because it is more expensive than other databases that support qualitative evaluation (eg HyperRESEARCH). However, each team felt that because MSCdatabase is tailored to MSC, significant benefits arose that would not be gained from the use of a generic database.

The time savings were seen to easily offset the cost. In addition, economies of scale came into play as only a single licence was required for all team members to use the database.

Being a web-based database, access to the database required access to the internet. This could be a difficulty in some locations. Internet access did not, however, prove an issue for any of these evaluations.

Coding data was very easy and efficient. When new codes were introduced partway through an evaluation however, the way in which previously entered data was coded against these new codes was not efficient. The evaluation teams fed this back to

To Use or Not to Use MSC database

In each case, the evaluation teams said that because the quality of the evaluation was improved as a result of using MSC database and "the database saved us so much time", they would recommend use of MSC database in similar situations. The evaluation teams identified only one situation in which they believed the value added by using MSC database would be limited. This was for very small evaluations that would not benefit from any analysis other than that the undertaken by the selection panel.

The evaluation teams particularly recommended use of MSCdatabase:

- When you wish to perform secondary analysis of MSC data with minimal time costs
- When the MSC has large numbers of interviews or is repeated because the database makes management of the data easy, efficient and secure.
- Where you can/will have inexperienced people enter the data because the data entry structures reduce the likelihood of errors in data entry and coding and enable delegation of some work by the evaluation team.
- Where you are not confident of data security because backups are guaranteed.
- Where an evaluation team is based in different locations because it enables all team members to enter and access data.
- Where you are wanting to use the data in the future because it is structured and secure.

Author Contacts

¹ Fiona Kotvojs - Kurrajong Hill Pty Ltd -fiona.kotvojs@bigpond.com ² Tania Warokka - Cardno Emerging Markets - tania.warokka@ssq-educationpartnership.or.id ³ Lia Marpaung - Norton Rose - molistarfish@gmail.com

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