



... a powerful tool for monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment.

## INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

---

This document is a guideline for the use of the *Most Significant Change (MSC) tool*. MSC is a qualitative and participatory technique involving the ongoing collection of stories of significant change. MSC goes beyond merely capturing and documenting participants' stories of impact, to offering a means of engaging in effective dialogue. Each story represents the storyteller's interpretation of impact, which is then reviewed and discussed. The process offers an opportunity for a diverse range of stakeholders to enter into a dialogue about program intention, impact and ultimately future direction.



<b>CHAPTER 1: MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE</b>	<b>3</b>
THE PURPOSE	4
<b>CHAPTER 2: THE MSC PROCESS</b>	<b>5</b>
STEP 1: STARTING AND RAISING INTEREST	5
STEP 2: DEFINING THE REPORTING PERIOD	6
STEP 3: DEFINING DOMAINS OF CHANGE	6
STEP 4: CAPTURING AND COLLECTING SIGNIFICANT CHANGE STORIES	7
STEP 5: DOCUMENTING MSC	8
STEP 6: SELECTING THE STORIES THAT DEMONSTRATE THE MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGE	9
STEP 7: PROVIDING FEEDBACK	12
STEP 8: USING MSC STORIES	13
<b>CHAPTER 3: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND TROUBLESHOOTING</b>	<b>14</b>
PROBLEMS WITH QUESTIONS AND TRANSLATIONS.	14
NOTHING HAS CHANGED, SO WHAT CAN WE REPORT?	14
WHY DO WE HAVE TO SELECT ONLY ONE SC STORY?	14
HOW LONG SHOULD THE STORIES BE?	14
WHOSE STORIES TO COLLECT?	15
THIS IS TOO TIME-CONSUMING!	15
THIS IS TOO COMPETITIVE!	15
NONE OF THE SC STORIES REALLY REPRESENT WHAT WE ARE DOING!	16
INDIVIDUAL STORIES VERSUS SITUATIONAL STORIES	16
WHAT ABOUT NEGATIVE CHANGES?	16
HOW MANY DOMAINS SHOULD BE USED?	16
WHAT SHOULD DOMAINS FOCUS ON?	16
ETHICS OF COLLECTING STORIES	17
WHO SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN THE SELECTION PROCESS?	17
WHAT HAPPENS TO THE STORIES THAT ARE FILTERED OUT?	18
WHAT ASPECTS OF MSC STORIES SHOULD BE VERIFIED?	18
<b>CHAPTER 4: APPENDIX</b>	<b>19</b>
MSC QUESTIONS FOR BENEFICIARIES	19
MSC CHAMPION REPORT	21
MSC STAFF (COACH/FACILITATOR) REPORT	23

## Chapter 1: Most Significant Change



The most significant change (MSC) technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. The process assesses the impact of a program by identifying the most important stories of change from the perspective of program participants and stakeholders. MSC stories describe the change that has occurred, how and why it happened and the reasons why the change was important. Once changes have been captured, the stories are read by a group who then hold an in-depth discussion about the value of these reported changes. When the MSC technique is implemented successfully, whole teams begin to focus their attention on program impact.

Unlike traditional monitoring techniques which focus on activities and outputs, MSC monitors (intermediate) outcomes and impact, providing information that can be used to help assess the performance of the program as a whole. MSC stories are collected from people directly involved in a program, including participants and field staff such as coaches and facilitators. Stories are collected by asking a simple questions such as: *'In your opinion, what is the most significant change that has happened for participants in the program over the last few months?'* They are also asked to report why they consider that change to be particularly significant.

This process is a simple method that makes sense of a large amount of complex information collected from many participants across a range of settings. Having a conversation at each stage of the process around the why certain stories of change were considered more important than others is an essential component of technique.

## The purpose

There are many benefits to using the MSC process to monitor and evaluate a program. These include:

1. It is a good way to identify **unexpected changes**.
2. The process allows people to **identify and discuss prevailing values** in their organisation and have **practical discussions** about which of those values are the most important. This happens when people reflect and discuss which of the SC stories is the most significant. This can happen at all levels of the organisation.
3. As it is a **participatory form of monitoring**, it does not require any special professional skills. Compared to other monitoring approaches, it is easy to communicate across cultures. . **Everyone can tell stories** about events they think were important.
4. **It encourages analysis as well as data collection** because people have to explain why they believe one change is more important than another.
5. It can **build staff capacity to analyse data and conceptualise impact**.
6. It delivers a **rich picture of what is happening**, rather than an overly simplified picture where organisational, social and economic developments are reduced to a single number.
7. It can be used to **monitor and evaluate bottom-up initiatives** that do not have predefined outcomes against which to evaluate.

## Chapter 2: The MSC Process

In this chapter, we present a comprehensive overview of how the MSC process can be implemented. There are several steps, listed below, which will be explained in greater detail. The order in which these steps are completed may vary depending on the objectives you have for undertaking this process.

- Step 1: Getting started and raising interest
  - Role of Champions
- Step 2: Defining the reporting period
- Step 3: Defining the domains of change
- Step 4: Capturing and Collecting stories
- Step 5: Documenting o MSC
- Step 6: Selecting the stories that demonstrate the most significant change
  - Criteria for selecting
- Step 7: Providing feedback
- Step 8: Using MSC stories

### Step 1: Getting started and raising interest

Getting started is perhaps the most daunting step. People may be skeptical about the validity of the technique and fear that it will take too much time. It will often take an enthusiastic individual or small group to raise interest in MSC. This may involve visiting key people and groups to show them how the MSC process works. It can often help to present stories from other programs and show example reports. If you want to raise interest, you need to be clear about the purpose of MSC and the role that it will play in your organization.

#### Metaphors for explaining the MSC approach

If you are attempting to initiate the adoption of MSC it may help to use a metaphor to explain it. These are our favorites.

**Newspaper:** A newspaper does not summarize yesterday's important events via pages and pages of 'indicators', instead they use engaging news stories about interesting events. Newspapers are divided into different sections (foreign news, domestic news, financial news, sport, leisure) in the same way that MSC uses domains. The most important stories are on the front page and the most important of these is usually at the top of the front page.

**Holiday memories:** What do you remember from your holiday? Do you remember the average things or the wonderful and terrible things? MSC helps teams of people focus on the memorable events, both wonderful and sometimes terrible and uses these events to understand the impact of a programme.

## Role of champions

Once you start working out how the MSC process might best fit your organisation, it is important to identify key people who are excited by MSC and could champion the technique. These people can be involved in the implementation and design of how to use MSC with different groups of beneficiaries or staff. These people will need a greater understanding of MSC so they can respond to the questions that will inevitably arise. These champions can:

- Excite and motivate people
- Answer questions about the technique
- Facilitate the selection of SC stories
- Encourage people to collect SC stories
- Ensure that feedback occurs
- Ensure that the stories are collected, organised and sent to review meetings
- Develop protocols to ensure confidentiality where necessary

## Step 2: Defining the reporting period

MSC are commonly used as a form of **monitoring**. Monitoring involves periodic collection of information, the frequency of which varies across programs and organisations. Organisations that collect SC stories may do so at different intervals, from weekly to yearly. The most common frequency is once every three months in order to coincide with other quarterly reporting requirements.

Each organisation that uses MSC will make its own decision about the most appropriate reporting period, balancing the benefits and effort involved and taking into account the reporting gaps that other existing M&E systems may miss out on.

If you require further information on planning and implementation, please do not hesitate to contact the WW Impact team ([impact@womenwin.org](mailto:impact@womenwin.org)).

## Step 3: Defining domains of change

Domains are broad topics or themes into which Significant Change stories can be categorised. A domain of change is not an indicator. Good indicators are supposed to be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound). Indicators must be defined so that everyone interprets them in the same way. Domains of change, on the other hand, are deliberately ambiguous to allow people to have different interpretations of what constitutes a change in that area.

Using domains of change can have an immediate practical value. It can help an organisation sort a large number of SC stories into more manageable amounts, which can each be analysed in turn. Determining the domains in advance can be beneficial as it provides some guidance to the people collecting stories about the kind of changes they should look out for without being too prescriptive.

Using predetermined domains can also help organisations track whether they are making progress towards their stated objectives. Having a domain for ‘any other type of change’ can be a useful open category that allows participants to report significant changes that don’t fit

into the named domains. This gives SC story collectors more freedom to focus on things that they think are relevant in their own context.

Women Win have identified different domains in which significant changes might occur following sport and life skills programs for girls:

- Changes in the quality of girls' lives, focusing on the *condition* in which they live
- Changes in how girls are perceived by the community, focusing on the *status* of girls
- Changes in the *behavior* of girls both in and outside of the (sports) field (team work etc)
- Changes in the *attitude* of girls linked to empowerment, self-esteem, and future outlook
- Changes in the *leadership* potential and competencies of girls
- Changes in sports skills and practices
- Changes in the acquired *knowledge* of girls, focusing on different themes like addressing Gender Based Violence, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, or Economic Empowerment
- Any other changes

#### Step 4: Capturing and Collecting Significant Change stories

The basis of the MSC process is an open question to beneficiaries, such as:

*'Looking back over the last few months, what do you think has been the most significant change in the quality of people's lives in this community?'*

Each part of this question is chosen for a specific purpose, as explained below.

*'Looking back over the last few months...'* – refers to a specific time period.

*...what do you think has been...'* – asks respondents to exercise their own judgment.

*'...the most significant...'* – asks respondents to be selective, not to try to comment on everything, but to focus in and report on one thing.

*'...change...'* – asks respondents to be more selective, to report a change rather than static aspects of the situation or something that was present in the previous reporting period.

*'...in the quality of people's lives...'* – asks respondents to be even more selective, to report only changes in the quality of people's lives rather than any change that has occurred. This part of the question asks about a specific domain of change, which can be modified depending on the predetermined domains.

*'...in this community?'* – asks respondents to focus their story on a specific person or people

There are several ways in which SC stories can be identified and documented. The choice of methodology depends in part on how actively the organisation wants to search for new SC stories against its need to tap into the existing knowledge of its field workers through

retrospective inquiry. From the options below you can choose which method will work best for your organization or experiment using different methods on with different target groups. The Impact Team from Women Win is able to assist you in selecting the most appropriate method for your organisation.

***Fieldworkers write down unsolicited stories that they have heard***

With this method fieldworkers document unsolicited stories they have heard in the course of their work. The implicit assumption here is that good fieldworkers, facilitators or coaches learn about change stories in the normal course of their work because they have daily and close contact with beneficiaries.

***By interview and note-taking***

Some organisations encourage nominated people to ‘interview’ beneficiaries and write comprehensive notes by hand. To strengthen ensure accuracy, interviewers read their notes back to the storyteller to check they have captured the essence of the story. The story is more valid if it is recorded in the storyteller’s own words. This technique can be improved by using a semi-structured interview. Such interviews can be a useful way of generating many SC stories in a short period of time. Stories may also be captured using a tape recorder and then transcribed. This particular method of collecting SC stories may be especially useful when MSC is being used for evaluation rather than monitoring processes.

***During group discussion or focus group discussions***

Instead of having a formal, one-to-one interview, another method involves a group of people sharing their stories of significant change. An individual who shares their story at a committee meeting or during a focus group discussion will often trigger additional stories from others who are present. A tape recorder can be used during these meetings to record spontaneous SC stories, or an individual can also document stories using pen and paper. Collecting stories in a group setting can be an effective and enjoyable technique.

***The beneficiary writes the story directly***

An additional method involves beneficiaries documenting their own stories. This may happen with beneficiaries bringing their own pre-written stories. Alternatively, you can hold a session where a facilitator guides the beneficiaries to think about and write their own stories on the spot.

**Step 5: Documenting MSC**

Examples standard formats used to collect MSC stories have been provided in the Appendix. These standard formats help to ensure that important details are included. These formats can be changed and adapted as needed, however make sure that they remain fairly simple for beneficiaries to complete. Complex forms can be off putting both for those completing the MSC and for those reviewing the stories. The key to the MSC process is asking a couple of simple open-ended questions. A structured questionnaire is not necessary.

Make sure that enough detail is included in the stories so that people who are not familiar to the program or context will be able to understand and follow the narrative. Check that the story-tellers have not made any assumptions about the reader’s background knowledge and encourage them to explain anything that may be unclear.



The key information that should be documented:

- **Information about who collected the story and when the events occurred**
- **Description of the story itself; what happened**
- **The significance (to the storyteller) of events described in the story**

Documenting **who collected the story and when** helps the reader put the story in context and allows for follow-up inquiries to be made about the story. The SC story itself should be documented as it is told. The **description** of the change identified should include factual information that makes it clear who was involved, what happened, where and when. Where possible, a story should be written as a simple narrative describing the sequence of events that took place.

The storyteller is also asked to explain the **significance** of the story from their point of view. This is a key part of MSC. Some storytellers may naturally end their stories this way but others will need to be prompted. Without this element, people reading and discussing the story may not understand why the story was significant. For example, a young woman may tell a story about going to a community meeting and asking a question. This may not seem very important to someone hearing this story. However, when the woman explains that this story was significant because she previously did not feel confident enough to attend a community meeting and that the program helped her gain the confidence to express her views in front of the village elders for the first time, the listener can understand why this story is so significant.

#### **Optional information to document**

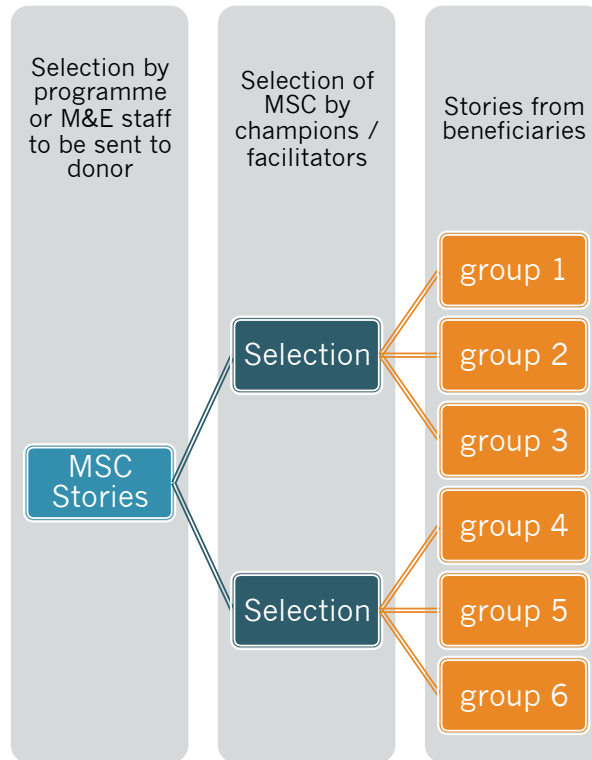
A useful addition to an SC story is a headline or title, similar to what might be used in a newspaper article. This can be convenient for participants to use to refer to the story when comparing it to others. It can also help the writer distil and communicate the essence of what happened.

Asking the participants at the end of the story about recommendations or lessons learned can help to draw out the implications of the story. Responses to these additional questions can be included in the section that describes the significance of the story.

### **Step 6: Selecting the stories that demonstrate the most significant change**

The MSC technique involves a selection process that takes several steps. Following the collection of stories, those who collected them sit together and discuss the stories within their group or site and then submit the ones they determine to be the most significant to the

next stage in the process. At this second stage, the selection procedure is then repeated, before the stories that are deemed most significant are once again passed onto a third stage. The diagram below (Figure 1) illustrates this flow of stories.



An example could be that one group of beneficiaries, (30 in total) are split up in groups of 5 to tell their stories. Each group selects their MSC and reports to the facilitators or MSC champions. These stories are then selected and discussed by the champions or facilitators. When all stories from different groups have been collected, a group of people, most often the champions together with M&E /programme staff, will then sit down together with the collected pile of documented stories which may or may not be assigned to domains. The task is then to reduce the pile of stories to one or two per domain. For each domain the group will select a story that they believe represents the most significant change of all. If the stories have not yet been assigned to domains, this should be done first.

The selection process begins with reading some or all of the stories either out loud or individually. Ideally stories should be read aloud, but the effectiveness and practicality of this may depend on the context. If the stories have already been allocated to domains, then all the stories from one domain are considered together. Various methods can be used to help groups choose the most significant of the stories. The reasons that the group gives for making the choices should be documented. You can experiment with different selection processes to find what best suits your cultural context.

While a number of different selection processes can be used, the key elements to story selection are:

- **Everybody reads the stories**
- **The group holds an in-depth conversation about which stories should be chosen**
- **The group decides which stories are felt to be most significant**
- **The reasons for the group’s choice(s) are documented**

### Criteria for selecting SCs

Below you can find a list of several ways of reaching a decision about which stories to select.

- **Majority rules:**  
A simple way of coming to a decision is to read the stories, make sure everyone understands them and then vote by show of hands. The main risk is that a choice will be made without any substantial discussion. Arguments about the merits of different SCs are important because they help to reveal the values and assumptions behind people’s choices. Only when this is done can participants make more informed choices about what is really of value.
- **Iterative voting:**  
In iterative voting, after the first vote, people discuss why they voted as they did. This process is followed by a second and then, a third vote. Ideally this is done with some movement towards consensus. In some cases, the participants who disagree with the majority view will eventually decide to agree. Where they are unwilling to do so, their dissenting views can be recorded as an important caveat to the group’s main judgment: for example, about an aspect of the story that was unclear or contradicted the main point of the story. Where groups remain more evenly split in their opinions, two stories may need to be chosen. Iterative voting can be time-consuming, but it fosters good quality judgments.
- **Scoring:**  
Instead of voting, participants can rate the value of a SC story. The ratings for each of the stories are then aggregated and the story with the highest rating is selected as the most significant. This is a more discriminating way of summarising judgments than a simple show of hands. It is also a method that can be used remotely, as well as in face-to-face meetings. The downside is the limited opportunity for dialogue, although explanations for ratings can be given at the same time as the ratings. Explanations are especially important when a participant rates an SC story much higher or lower than other participants.
- **Pre-scoring then a group vote:**  
This method is suitable for groups who are short of meeting time. Prior to the meeting, participants are asked to read SC stories and rate their significance. These ratings are summarised in a table and presented to the participants when they meet face-to-face. Participants discuss the scores and cast their votes. Prior scoring ensures that participants have read the stories before the meeting, and can lead to a shorter and more focused group discussion at the meeting. The disadvantage is that all stories must be sent to participants some time before the meeting.
- **Secret ballot:**  
It is also possible to cast votes anonymously. Each person writes their choice of SC story on a slip of paper, and then the total votes are presented. This should be followed by an open discussion of the reasons for the choices. This process can be surprisingly useful, especially if there are power inequalities in the group or if people

are initially reluctant to cast their votes publicly.

### Identifying criteria before or after the selection?

One decision that must be made is whether to identify criteria for selecting stories before or after reading them. If the criteria are agreed beforehand, the process of learning (via selection of SCs) will be significantly influenced by what the organisation already thinks it knows. When the selection criteria are not discussed until after the stories have been read, the process becomes much more open to new ideas. Personal preferences may also be relevant. People vary in their degree of personal comfort about making judgments with or without predefined criteria. Although there is a choice here, we believe that if MSC is being used to also support organisational learning, the selection criteria should not be decided in advance but should emerge through discussion of the reported changes.

*It is important to remember that in the MSC process transparency is an important way of making subjectivity accountable. Therefore, it is very important to add the second step of capturing and discussing the reasons for choice.*

### Step 7: Providing feedback

Feedback is important in all monitoring, evaluation and impact-oriented systems and MSC is no exception. The results of a selection process must be fed back to those who provided the SC stories. At the very least, this feedback should explain which SC was selected as most significant and why. It also helps to provide information on how the selection process was organised.

There are several reasons why feedback is useful. The most important of these is that information about which SC stories were selected can help participants' identify SCs for the next reporting period. Feedback about why a selection was made can expand or challenge participants' views of what is significant. Having a better understanding of the selection process can also help participants assess the quality of the collective judgments that were made. Feedback additionally shows that others have read and engaged with the SC stories rather than simply filed them, which is the unfortunate fate of a lot of monitoring data.



Providing feedback about what was selected, why and how, can potentially complete a communication loop between different levels of participants in an organisation. In doing so, it can create an ongoing dialogue about what is significant change.

### Step 8: Using MSC stories

There is increasing pressure on NGOs to justify themselves, explain their relevance and demonstrate their impact. Many people accept anecdotally that sports can have a positive impact on the lives and development of young people. However, there is an obvious lack of qualified research into the specific impacts of how sport addresses social development and virtually none about the impact of sport on gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights or economic inequalities. This lack of substantive proof often keeps organisations from improving and adjusting sports programmes based on evidence and keeps and large donors from prioritizing sport as an intervention strategy.

In response to this, Women Win believes that the trend may be shifting towards more profound and sound qualitative and quantitative M&E and research. MSC is an innovative tool that can be used to strengthen our M&E database and which has the potential to translate data into stories and demonstrate impact. The selected MSC stories can therefore have many formats and purposes. The selected MSC stories will all be stored in our story data bank and can be used in communications and reports demonstrate to donors the impact of our programmes on a qualitative level. They can be published for press release and on our web to show partners and stakeholders what we are doing and the change we are making.

## Chapter 3: Frequently Asked Questions and Troubleshooting

The most common problems and concerns that are encountered when implementing MSC are listed in this chapter. Contact the WW Impact team [impact@womenwin.org](mailto:impact@womenwin.org) if you have any further questions.

### Problems with questions and translations

Many people have commented on the difficulty of eliciting good stories. This is often associated with how the question has been translated, particularly the word ‘significance’ or ‘stories’. Eliciting good stories requires some research skills, as does community development in general. You must be able to engage with people and elicit their views. If the question isn’t working then you may need to re-phrase it carefully. Once you find a good way of phrasing the question in the local language, stick to it.

### Nothing has changed, so what can we report?

This response may suggest that people are looking for changes that can be defined as significant in some sort of absolute sense. It helps to ask story-tellers to look for any changes at all and then to identify those they think are the most significant of all the changes they have noted. As Heraclitus reportedly said, ‘It is not possible to step into the same river twice’ meaning that change is taking place all the time, so it is never true to say that nothing has changed. If you feel that there is no change to be seen, then maybe you need to take a closer look.

### Why do we have to select only one SC story?

For a range of reasons participants may express concern about having to choose one SC story from among the many SC stories in front of them. If they don’t understand the MSC technique, then you can explain how the process of having to make a choice, especially in a group setting, can stimulate debate and encourage people to think more deeply about what is involved in each story. Reluctance to make a choice can also have a more social and cultural basis. Participants may want to avoid conflict or being seen as critical of others. If this is the case, then consider different ways of structuring the selection process. Some of the options, including voting by secret ballot, are outlined in Step 5. It may be necessary to allow participants to select more than one story. In some settings, participants have been asked to identify SC stories that can be eliminated (i.e. to select the least significant rather than the most significant). We have not experienced any situation where it was impossible to devise some form of selection process.

### How long should the stories be?

Most MSC stories are a page or less in length, with a few as long as two pages. Shorter MSC stories are quicker and easier to read, but they should not be so short that vital information is left out. Organisations usually have a preference for shorter or longer stories depending on their culture. Some organisations value short and to-the-point accounts of change while others favour longer, more detailed and engaging stories.

### **Whose stories to collect?**

Deciding which people to ask to tell SC stories depends on the organisational context and the subject matter of the domains. For example, for a domain concerning changes in people's lives, appropriate people to ask for stories would be the beneficiaries themselves or the people who interact with them, such as grassroots workers. However, for a domain about 'changes in partnerships and networks with other NGOs' the best storytellers are likely to be program staff and staff from partner organisations who are in a position to comment.

Experience suggests that stories narrated by beneficiaries are especially valuable but are often the most difficult to elicit. Ideally, beneficiary groups would be trained in sharing and selecting SC stories and would report their selected story along with the reasons for their choice. However, in some contexts this is not practical and the storytellers by default will be the fieldworkers. Even when the stories are to come directly from the communities, it often helps to start off by first collecting stories from fieldworkers. This helps to ensure that staff understand the process before introducing it to others.

### **This is too time-consuming!**

Time can be a significant problem in large organisations with high numbers of beneficiaries and staff. The selection process should be structured so that no meeting arranged for the selection of SC stories takes more than two hours. Try circulating stories to be read before meetings or having a facilitator at the selection meetings. Established procedures for reading, discussing, scoring or voting then documenting agreed choices can also help. Organisations can also change the frequency of reporting SC stories if they find it is a very time consuming process.

The documentation of SC stories by individual participants may be considered time-consuming for a number of reasons. The process may be new and participants may not be familiar with narrative reporting. In this case, time needs to be taken to build the capacity of people to collect stories. It may help to provide positive feedback about good practice and give examples of good practice from other organisations.

### **This is too competitive!**

Selecting the most significant story may go against the non-competitive ethos of some organisations and cultures. Complaints about the competitive nature of the selection process may also reflect individual anxieties about personal performance. While a sense of competition can often be healthy, one way of responding to these concerns is to switch the focus so that any apparent competition is between stories rather than individuals, or between the values behind the choice of stories being made rather than between the stories themselves.

Selection processes can also be designed to control competitive tensions. For example, in one Australian implementation, some participants felt that the selection process was building competition between staff. Some staff disliked the pressure that this generated. The selection process was changed so that staff no longer voted for stories and the selection was done by a stakeholder steering group.

## **None of the SC stories really represent what we are doing!**

This may reflect awareness of a gap between expectations and reality, or between head office and field office views of reality. It may also reflect field staff reporting what they think is expected instead of something more realistic. One pre-emptive way to respond is during initial training in MSC. Give a clear message that factual accounts of significant changes of any kind, both expected and unexpected, are required and that repeated instances of the same kind of significant change are unlikely to be selected as most significant each consecutive reporting period. Another way to respond is through informative feedback attached to the stories selected as most significant. This can point out the positive features of the story and also suggest what is still missing. If frustration is being expressed by field staff, ask them to explain what it is that they think is missing and give an example, which can then be converted into a story.

## **Individual stories versus situational stories**

We are often asked whether situational or group stories are permitted in MSC. A situational story describes a change in a community or group, rather than being focused on an individual. Any form of SC story is permissible in MSC. The choice will depend on what the organisation using MSC is looking for: individual changes, group changes or institutional changes. These options were discussed in Step 2 above in connection with choice of domains. Because beneficiaries may not be aware of changes that are occurring in more than one location, it is useful to also seek stories from field staff as well.

## **What about negative changes?**

One choice facing organisations implementing MSC is whether to have a domain that explicitly focuses on significant negative changes. Our experience suggests that 90 to 95 per cent of SC stories tend to be about positive changes. However, this figure varies according to how clearly those in charge signal that negative as well as positive changes should be reported. It also depends on the extent to which negative changes, once reported, are then acknowledged and responded to positively. Some organisations have set up a domain specifically for negative stories, thus creating an explicit demand to learn and create “successful failures”.

## **How many domains should be used?**

In our experience, between three and five domains is a manageable number. The limiting factor is how much time participants are willing to spend in discussing each domain. Participants may find the process too time-consuming if it takes more than two hours to review changes in all the domains in any one meeting.

## **What should domains focus on?**

Domains can be identified before SC stories are collected or afterwards by sorting SC stories into meaningful groups (see also chapter 2). This depends on the extent to which the organisation wants to be open to new experiences rather than continuing to be guided by past experiences. Any documentation about the MSC process and its products should explain, albeit briefly, how the domains were selected. This helps other people reading about the results to put them in context.



One other question that often arises is whether the domains of change should only be about changes caused by the organisation that is using MSC, or include changes caused by other people, organisations or broader societal influences. For example, increased participation by individuals could result from changes in government legislation relating to the right to free association rather than anything to do with the organisation's own activities. Nevertheless, in most societies, such changes would be considered significant. In practice, most users of MSC have focused on changes that are a direct or indirect result of what their organisations are doing. There is, however, an argument for saying that many organisations already see the world too narrowly, and that it would be healthy to identify SCs arising from any cause.

These options do not need to be mutually exclusive. It should be possible to track both types of changes through the one application of MSC. One or more domains could be about changes caused by the organisation's work, while another could ask specifically about changes not caused or influenced by the organisation.

### **Ethics of collecting stories**

Attention must be paid to the ethics of collecting stories from individuals. We suggest that you develop processes to track consent right from start. When a storyteller tells a story, the person collecting the story needs to explain how the story is to be used and to check that the storyteller is happy for the story to be used. The storyteller should also be asked whether they wish their name to accompany the story. If not, names need to be deleted from the story from then on. If a person or group is mentioned or identifiable within a story not told by them, ask the storyteller to consult with the third party to check whether they are happy for their name to be mentioned in the story. If a storyteller wants to tell a story about a third party without naming that person, the identity of that person should be protected. If a storyteller believes that their story is only going to be used for monitoring and evaluation purposes, it would be unethical to publish the story in the local paper without consulting the storyteller. Even when consent has been given, it is good practice to check with storytellers before placing any stories in external media such as newspapers.

### **Who should be involved in the selection process?**

At a minimum, it should be people with line management responsibilities in relation to the people who have forwarded the SC stories. It would be preferable to also include people with advisory responsibilities in relation to the same staff as well as others who would normally make use of information coming from the people who forwarded the stories. The uppermost level would ideally involve donors, investors and other stakeholder representatives. Although there are many reasons to involve beneficiaries in the selection and feedback process, there are also some risks to be considered. Firstly, beneficiaries' time may not be paid for in the same way as field staff and so asking beneficiaries to collect and select stories could be seen as an unethical imposition. It is also worth considering which field staff to involve in the selection process. Things can become uncomfortable when field staff are involved in selecting stories written largely by themselves. Selection appears to be easier when the stories have been written by different people. The acceptability of self-selection seems to depend on the culture of the organisation. When in doubt, it may be better to design a structure so that most of the SC stories are selected by people other than those who wrote them.

### **What happens to the stories that are filtered out?**

Stories that are filtered out should not be thrown away. They should be kept on file so that they are accessible to others within the organisation using MSC, for as long as they continue to use MSC, and arguably even for a while after that. This is to enable some systematic content analysis of the full set of documented SC stories. It is also worth noting that the SC stories that are not selected at higher levels in the organisation still have some local value. Each story is important to the person who originally documented it, and possibly to others at higher levels even though it was finally decided that a different SC was more significant. It may be worthwhile following up all such stories later on to see how they were used, or whether they had any influence on what people did.

### **What aspects of MSC stories should be verified?**

Both the description and interpretation aspects of MSC stories can benefit from verification. With the descriptive part of a story, it is useful to consider whether any information is missing and to ask how accurate the facts are. Is there enough information to enable an independent third party to find out what happened, when and where, and who was involved? It is likely that most stories will contain some errors of fact. The question is the extent to which these errors affect the significance given to the events by the people involved or the observer reporting the event.

With the interpretive part of a story, it is useful to ask whether the interpretations given to the events are reasonable. It is often impossible to disprove an interpretation, particularly when some information, especially about future consequences, may not be available. As in everyday life, we can look for contradictions within the story, or with other accounts of the same event. It is also worth asking whether what the reporter did after documenting the story is consistent with the contents of the story





---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**3. Why is this story significant to you? Can you give an example of how your life has changed, what is the difference or the impact?**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**4. Give your “news story” a headline, summarizing it in a few words.**

---

---

**5. How has [name of organization] and/or coordinators/ staff/ coaches contributed to this change?**

---

---

---

---









---

---

---

---

If choosing one change is too difficult, feel free to describe more than one (using additional forms).

2. Describe who was involved, what happened, where and when. Please include enough detail to make it understandable by someone not familiar with your placement and to allow follow up later to see if the change has continued.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

3. Are there any lessons for Women Win arising from change you have written about?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

4. Give your “news story” a headline, summarising it in a few words.

---



