

Most Significant Change (MSC) Guidelines: International Programme 2025-2028

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In the international programme 2025-2028, in addition to the usual indicators, Interaction plans to use the Most Significant Change (MSC) technique. The MSC technique is a qualitative approach for monitoring and evaluating international development programmes and is best used in combination with other monitoring and evaluation methods. While quantitative indicators can only partially capture the successful implementation of the international programme, qualitative monitoring is essential to complement them and provide a more accurate picture of reality. This document is primarily based on: Davies, R. & Dart, J. (2005). *Most Significant Change (MSC) Guide*, as well as on the pilot MSC project led by Morija in Burkina Faso in 2023 and the first MSC conference organized, among others, by the technique's creator, Rick Davies. At the conference, Interaction and Morija presented a poster titled “Scaling MSC to an International Programme to Facilitate Monitoring & Learning”. This document will be regularly updated.

In addition to this document:

- 1) Data collection and sampling guidelines have been developed, covering all aspects of sampling when preparing for MSC collection.
- 2) A template for MSC surveys has been developed

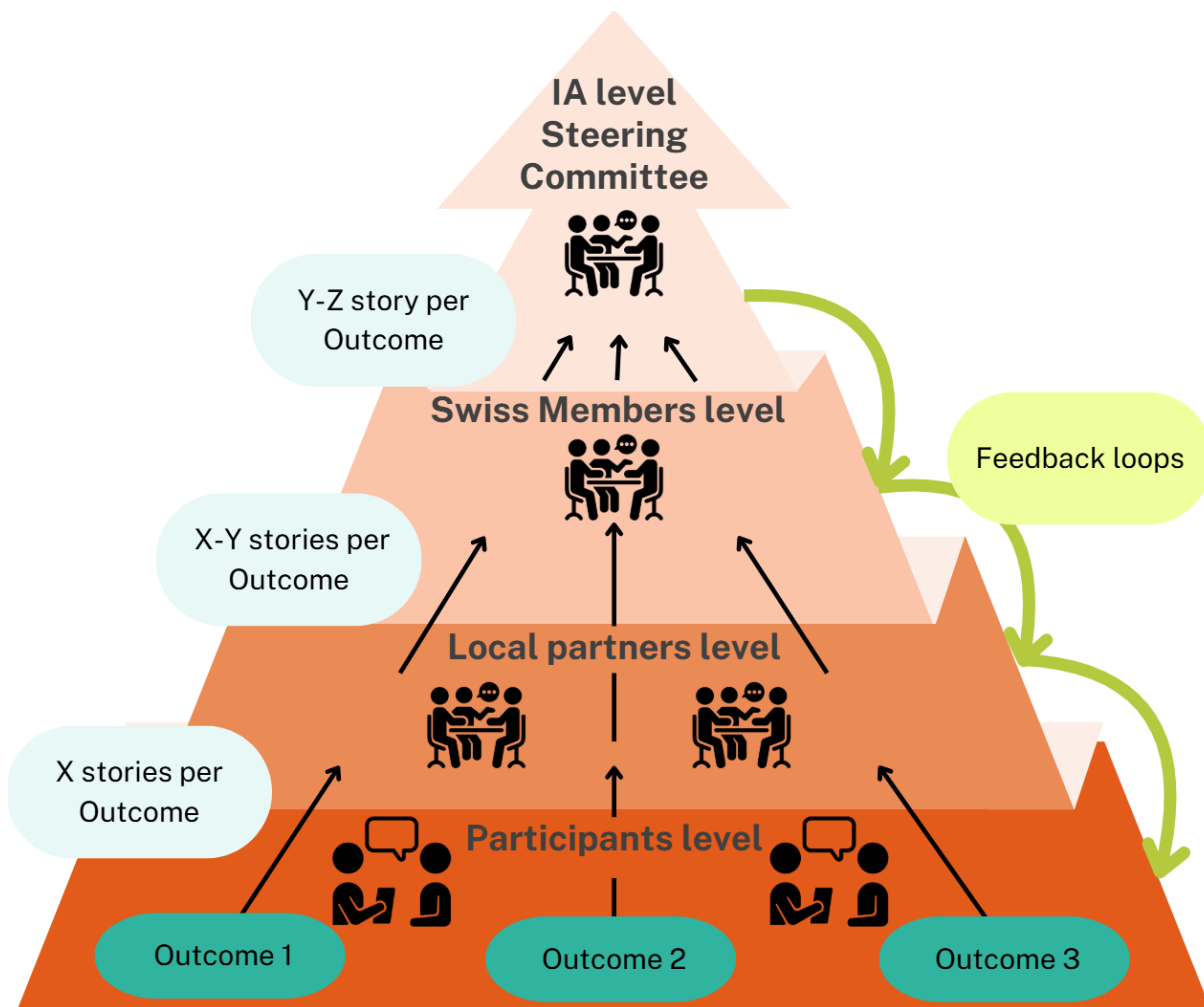
MSC in international programme 25-28

For each Outcome in the logframe (Except Outcome 5), Interaction will collect and select MSC stories.

Baseline	2025	2026	2027	2028
0 story	1 story per Outcome ¹	1 story per Outcome	1 story per Outcome	1 story per Outcome

Stories for outcome 4 will be collected and selected by the StopPoverty team. This document focuses on the collection and selection of MSC stories for Outcome 1 to 3 within Global south projects. The chart below provides an overview of the approach, which will be explained in detail in the following sections:

¹ Here, we only mention the stories that will be selected for the final reporting at the Interaction level. Many more stories should be collected at the local level and used for monitoring and learning purposes at the project level.



1. Steps to collect and select MSC stories

Steps to Collect and select MSC Stories

1. Develop a Clear Data Collection Plan by Domain/Outcome – Local partner level

Create a detailed plan that outlines who will collect the stories, how often they will be collected, the methods to be used, and the sampling and selection strategy.

Local partners should collect stories for each of the three Outcomes to which they are making a significant contribution. If a partner's contribution to a particular Outcome is minimal (such as contributing to only one indicator), it may be more effective to focus story collection efforts on other Outcomes where their impact is more substantial.

The standard MSC methodology recommends predefining “domains of change,” which are broad categories where changes may occur (e.g., community participation, quality of life, emergency aid, WASH, food security, environment, negative changes, etc.). In large projects contributing to all Outcomes, it may be practical to use the Outcomes themselves as domains of change.

However, since domains of change are not essential for data collection, partners have the flexibility to either predefine these domains or determine them during the story selection process.

2. Train Fieldworkers, Facilitators and selectioners- Local & Swiss partner levels

Provide comprehensive training for those responsible for collecting stories. Training should cover the MSC technique, active listening skills, effective interviewing techniques, and how to ask probing questions to elicit detailed and meaningful stories. This preparation is essential to ensure consistency and quality in data collection.

Group(s) in charge of selecting the stories should also have a clear understanding of their tasks and of the purpose of the selection (to learn and improve the programme)

3. Select, Engage and Inform Participants – Local partner level

After having chosen your sample (see Data collection and sampling guidelines), Inform participants about the purpose of the MSC technique and how their stories will be used. Build trust and encourage openness by explaining the importance of their perspectives. Ensure participants know they can share both positive and negative stories without fear of judgment.

4. Conduct Interviews or Group Discussions – local partner level

Stories are collected every year at least once through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions or written submissions. A template for MSC surveys has been developed to help local staff collecting stories. In some cases, very insightful positive or negative stories may not emerge from active searching but rather be heard in the normal course of fieldworkers' activities. The assumption here is that fieldworkers will naturally learn about change stories as part of their daily work because they have close, regular contact with their beneficiaries.²

Record the stories accurately by taking detailed notes or using audio/video recording devices, with the participant's consent. Ensure that the recording method respects the participant's comfort and privacy.

5. Translate and Transcribe Stories (if needed) – local & Swiss partner levels

If stories are collected in different languages, translate them accurately to maintain the original meaning and context. Transcribe the audio recordings verbatim to create a clear, detailed account of each story.

If needed, you can use Chat GPT to assist with the translation. A prompt like the following could be used (here the premium version was used to allow directly providing word documents):

“You are an expert translator in the development cooperation sector. You will translate eight change stories in African French language into English. The stories come from a WASH project in Burkina Faso. I am going to attach the eight stories as Word documents. On the first page, you find general information, which you do not need to translate. From the second page onwards, the documents note responses to four questions. Please read them carefully and translate each question for each story without changing the meaning.”

It is important to note that Chat GPT translation should not be taken as granted and should always be reviewed by someone.

6. Review and Select Stories – local, Swiss & Steering committee levels

The selection process is a crucial step, as it forms the foundation for learning from the stories.

This process should ideally take place at every level of the programme (local partners, Swiss members, and Interaction). Selection is carried out by a group of people, and multiple approaches can be used

² Davies, R. & Dart, J. (2005), The ‘Most Significant Change’ (MSC) Technique: A Guide to Its Use, version 1.0, p. 24

depending on the organizational structure. One option is to use existing committees, while another is to create a new committee specifically for selecting stories. A diverse group of stakeholders, including program and management staff, beneficiaries, and community representatives, can be brought together to review and select the most significant stories. Generally, it is preferable not to involve those who collected the stories or the storytellers themselves in this process.

For each selection group, a facilitator should ideally guide the discussions. First, the compiled stories are read aloud in a plenary session. Next, the stories should be organized according to the (pre)defined domains of change (e.g., agricultural practices, organizational capacities, quality of life, participation in development activities, unexpected changes, or specific Outcomes such as 1-3). Following this, a discussion and “vote” (show of hands, scores, secret ballots, etc.) should be conducted to select one or a few of the most impactful stories per domain or Outcome. The justifications for each selection should be thoroughly documented.

Subsequently, a follow-up discussion may be held to analyse and refine the selected stories, focusing on aspects such as:

- Evaluating unexpected changes.
- Assessing the frequency and significance of different types of changes.
- Identifying which aspects of a project contributed to these changes.
- Determining whether the factors driving these changes are context-specific or transferable to other settings.

Based on the insights gained from the analysis, stakeholders can propose adjustments or reorientations to guide future actions.

At each level, multiple groups can successively discuss the stories, if desired. This approach can increase stakeholder involvement in the process and enhance the adoption of MSC as a global learning tool. Local partners should collect and select stories by the end of the year. Swiss partners should have access to the stories and their initial selection by the beginning of the following year. These stories, along with the selections made by the Swiss partners, are then presented in the annual report to IA. After the submission of the annual report, the steering committee will make the final selection of one or a few stories per Outcome.

7. Verify the stories selected to be shared

All stories should be verified for accuracy before being shared. This may involve consulting stakeholders close to the interviewee to corroborate the key changes highlighted in the story.

8. Share and Use the Stories – all levels

Share the selected MSC stories with key stakeholders, such as donors, community members, and programme staff. Use the stories for learning, decision-making, and improving programme strategies. Incorporate them into reports, presentations, or other communication materials.

9. Provide Feedback to lower level and participants – All levels

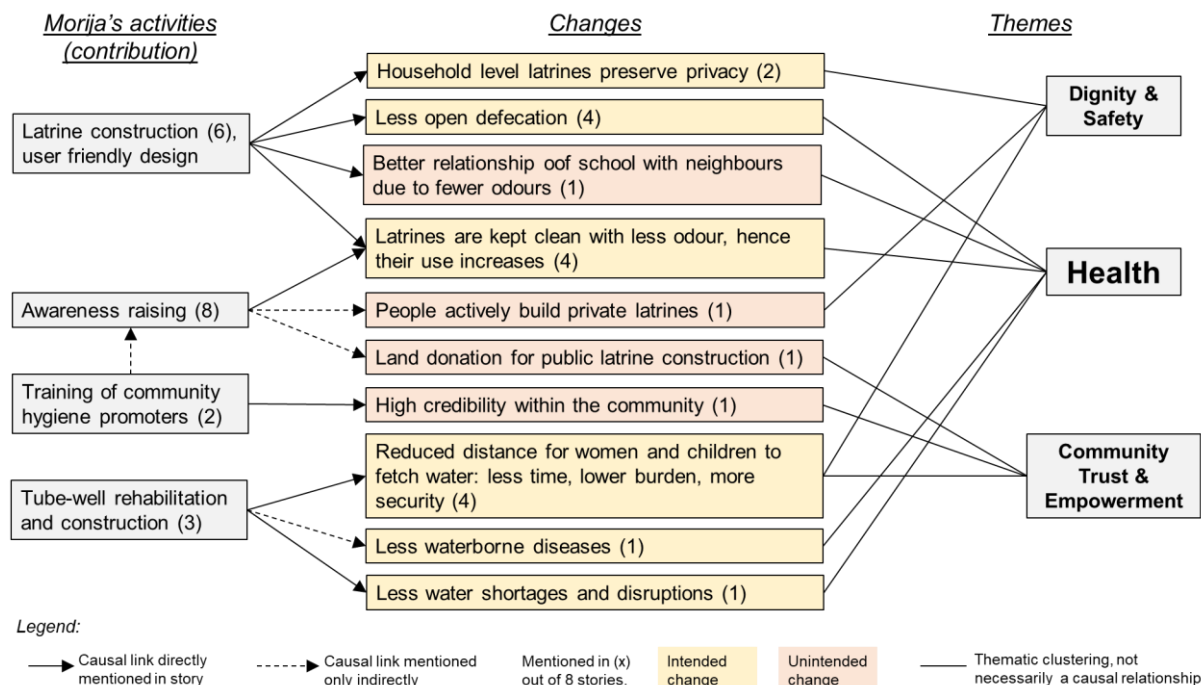
Offer feedback to lower levels or to the storytellers about how their stories were used and their impact on programme learning and decision-making. This can help build trust, encourage participation and further discussion.

10. Repeat the Process every year – all levels

To monitor changes over time, collect MSC stories every year. This ongoing process helps track the evolution of changes and continuously learn from participants' experiences. In some cases, such as negative stories, it may be beneficial to follow up with the storytellers after some time or after the project has been reoriented, to determine if the situation has changed.

Analyze the Stories

Alongside the story selection process, if needed, we can analyze the selected stories to identify common domains, patterns, and insights related to the programme's impact. This analysis can help understand what changes are most valued by participants and provide qualitative evidence of programme outcomes. Such an analysis can be done manually, especially if only a few stories were collected. For example, the chart below summarizes the manual analysis conducted for the MSC pilot project in Burkina-Faso.



2. Analysis of themes and changes in the Morija MSC pilot project

If desired or needed because to many stories were collected, the analysis could be assisted with chat GPT. The following prompt was used for the MSC pilot project:

“You are an expert in qualitative analysis in the development cooperation sector. You are analysing eight change stories in French language from a project in Burkina Faso implemented by Morija. The programme aimed to improve the WASH situation. The change story collection exercise also tried to collect unexpected changes.

I am going to attach the eight stories as Word documents. On the first page, you find general information. From the second page onwards, the documents note responses to four questions. Please read them carefully and go step by step through the following instructions:

- 1) Read the responses to the four change questions carefully.
- 2) Summarise each story in English in one paragraph.
- 3) Develop a list of overarching change themes that emerge from the responses to question 2.

- 4) Additionally analyse questions 3 and 4 to add information to the list about why the change was significant (question 3) and how Morija contributed to it (question 4)
- 5) Put these in a table with the following columns
- Theme (from question 2)
 - Illustrative quote (from question 2)
 - Number of responses that match the theme (from question 2)
 - Significance (question 3)
 - Morija's contribution (question 4)

The prompt gave the following table:

Theme (Q2)	Illustrative Quote (Q2)	Number of Responses (Q2)	Significance (Q3)	Morija's Contribution (Q4)
Improved Sanitation Infrastructure	"Les latrines que Morija réalise respect les normes." (Basile)	5	Enhanced privacy and hygiene.	Training and supervision in latrine construction and maintenance.
Access to Clean Water	"Notre forage est en panne... Morija a pu réhabiliter ce forage." (Salif)	6	Reduced effort and time for water access.	Rehabilitation of wells and continuous maintenance support.
Community Health and Hygiene	"La fin de la défécation à l'air libre." (Jean)	3	Improved community health and environment.	Sensitization and hygiene education.
Empowerment through Infrastructure	"Avec la réalisation d'un forage... fini les longues attentes." (Hamidou)	2	Community empowerment and reduced dependency.	Direct construction and facilitation of infrastructure projects.
Behavioral Change in Hygiene Practices	"La sensibilisation apporter un changement de comportement." (Moussa)	4	Improved hygiene practices and reduced health risks.	Providing resources, training, and consistent follow-up.

3. Table of change themes, significance, and contributions.

ChatGPT analysis could or should be iterated to increase depth of understanding, mitigate potential bias, and ensure reliability.

Overall, we can see from both analyses that the results are somewhat similar. However, the manual analysis offers greater precision and subtlety. ChatGPT analysis might be more precise and useful when a large number of stories need to be analyzed. Qualitative analyses conducted manually or with Chat GPT are subjective. Results are often influenced by the researcher's (or Chat GPT) biases and interpretations, as qualitative data is usually open to multiple interpretations.

Limitations or challenges with the MSC Technique:

The MSC technique, while useful for capturing qualitative insights and understanding the impact of development programmes, has several limitations. However, being aware of these limitations can help in mitigating them:

- **Subjectivity in Story Selection:** The process of selecting "most significant" stories is inherently subjective. Different stakeholders (e.g., local staff, Swiss staff, project participants, etc.) may have different opinions about which stories are the most significant, leading to potential bias in the selection process.
- **Lack of Generalizability:** Because the MSC technique focuses on a few in-depth stories rather than a large sample, the findings are not statistically representative of the entire population. The results cannot be generalized to all project participants or the entire target population.
- **Time-Consuming Process:** Collecting, recording, and analysing stories can be time-consuming and resource intensive. It requires substantial effort from both fieldworkers and those responsible for story selection, analysis, and documentation.
- **Dependence on Storytelling/Interviewing Skills:** The quality and depth of the collected stories depend on the ability of participants to articulate their experiences and the skills of the interviewer to draw out detailed and meaningful stories. If participants are not comfortable with storytelling or the interviewers are not skilled, the quality of the data collected may suffer. For this reason, strong training and preparation are essential for fieldworkers responsible for collecting stories.
- **Possible Exclusion of Less Vocal Participants:** The technique may (un)intentionally exclude participants who are less vocal, less confident, or less likely to share their stories, such as marginalized groups or those who do not feel comfortable speaking up in focus group meetings. A Heterogenous purposive sampling strategy may be required to include marginalized project participants (See our Data collection and sampling guidelines).
- **Potential for Incomplete or Inaccurate Information:** Stories are based on personal perspectives and memories, which can sometimes be incomplete, biased, or inaccurate. Participants may forget important details or remember events differently over time.
- **Difficulty in Focusing on one Effect/Impact (the most significant one):** In some cultures or with certain individuals, it may be challenging to focus on one specific change. However, it is crucial to guide each interviewee to identify and elaborate on one key change, while acknowledging any cascading sub-changes that stem from it.
- **Requires a Supportive Organizational learning Culture:** Successful implementation of MSC requires an organizational culture that values qualitative insights and is open to learning from

both positive and negative stories. Organizations that prioritize quantitative data may find it challenging to integrate MSC findings effectively.

- **Challenges in Comparing Results Across Contexts:** Since MSC relies heavily on context-specific stories, it can be challenging to compare results across different settings, regions, or timeframes.
- **Limited Usefulness for Measuring Attribution:** While MSC can provide insights into significant changes, it does not always clearly attribute those changes directly to a specific programme intervention, especially in complex or multi-faceted projects where many factors may contribute to outcomes.
- **Risk of Focusing Only on Success Stories:** There is a risk that the MSC technique might prioritize or highlight only the positive stories of change, potentially overlooking failures or challenges that are equally important for learning and improvement. To prevent this, the MSC survey can specifically include questions asking for negative stories as well.

Additional resources:

Resources
INTRAC (2020). Qualitative and Quantitative Methods .
INTRAC (2017). Most Significant Change
Davies, R. & Dart, J. (2005). Most Significant Change (MSC) Guide .

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