WORKING DOCUMENT
Stories of Change and
Most Significant Change manual
of the
Africa Centre for Evidence

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This is a living manual internal to the Africa Centre for Evidence (ACE).
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Contents

1. The Africa Centre for Evidence and monitoring, evaluation & learning

During 2021, The Africa Centre for Evidence (ACE) invested in designing and building its Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) system. The draft [MEL Framework](#) (May 2021) and our updated [Integrated Theory of Change and Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning system document](#) (December 2021) are both available via our website. They represent the development of our thinking and ongoing application of our approaches. As part of the ongoing development of our MEL system, we have further developed our use of Stories of Change as a qualitative data collection tool and introduced the analysis approach known as Most Significant Change. This manual presents how ACE applies this method of data collection and analysis in detail.

2. Overview of the Stories of Change and Most Significant Change approaches

ACE has a five-year strategy (2019-2023). In 2020, we started work on a MEL system for ACE and realised we needed to first revisit our strategy and our Theory of Change (TOC). In 2021, after stalled attempts to work on our TOC and MEL system, we finally brought in a MEL specialist to help us to set up the system. This led to a revised TOC and closely-linked MEL system.

ACE's desired impact goal remains to reduce poverty and inequality in communities living in poverty in Africa. We focus on the African countries where ACE works directly or has delivery partners. Because this is an ambitious impact to work towards, ACE realised early on that we can only contribute towards it as part of a bigger network of organisations and governments. Our contribution to this desired impact is to support the use of evidence in policy efforts to reduce poverty and inequality in Africa.

Our TOC is based on the theory that by delivering our four portfolios of work[1], and in working together with partners and governments to increase the use of evidence in decision-making, we contribute to an enabling environment for evidence-use. As a result of this enabling environment, policy that impacts on the reduction of poverty and inequality will be adopted and implemented.

a) What are Stories of Change?

Rather than dry numbers, using narratives in the form of stories has proven to be a powerful way to communicate and learn from messages. "Success stories" are an important avenue to disseminate information, share knowledge, and learn from past experiences. They provide readers, viewers, or listeners with real-world examples and demonstrations of positive change in their circumstances. Typically, success stories describe a phenomenon in three stages:

- STAGE 1: illustrate the challenges, problems, or the complex situation
- STAGE 2: describes the measures and initiatives taken to respond and change the challenging circumstances
- STAGE 3: report on the success or the positive change achieved

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[1] Our portfolios are: the art and science of evidence-use, evidence capacities, evidence communities, and evidence synthesis.

The readers, viewers, or listeners of these stories are usually people who can relate with the story described. They are people who want to learn, are motivated, and encouraged by the story of success shared.

We have further developed this approach by capturing not only positive success stories but also considering the changes that might be negative or appear neutral. While we continue to collect positive stories of change (SOCs) and use them both for evaluation and promotion of our work, we do also consider stories of any kind of changes which we have influenced.

b) What is the Most Significant Change approach to analysis?

The Most Significant Change (MSC) approach to analysis involves interrogating SOCs to understand their significance. There are ten steps to implementing this approach as laid out by Serrat (2009). Below they are listed with notes on how we apply them at ACE in Table 1.

Table 1: Steps in the most significant change approach to analysis and how ACE applies these	
Step 1 **Getting started with establishing champions and getting familiar with the approach**	Our aim is to have a plan that meets all our needs and which is realistic in terms of formats and scale. We have a dedicated MEL lead, a part-time SOC administrator responsible for collecting SOCs, engaged leadership, and a team of MEL focal points across our portfolios. All these individuals attend monthly MEL meetings. All of us with responsibilities for SOCs also attend quarterly SOC reflection workshops.
Step 2 **Establishing "domains of change"**	Domains of change should be discussed in advance although must also include an element of flexibility. Previously within the Africa Evidence Network, we focused on domains of change linked to relationships – greater connections and collaborations. As we have widened the approach to all of ACE's work, this list has been expanded to include domains relating to our desired goal of increasing the use of evidence in decision-making (as a means to reducing poverty and inequality), as well as to each of our four portfolios that contribute to attaining this outcome. We have added a domain about our interrelated work to improve awareness of what we do through effective communication. This has led us to a working list of six domains of change: 1. Increased awareness of ACE's work to advance evidence-informed decision-making (our communications goal) 2. Increased understanding of evidence-informed decision-making (the focus of our art and science of evidence-use portfolio) 3. Increased capacities for evidence-informed decision-making (the focus of our evidence capacities portfolio) 4. Increased connections and collaborations across the evidence-informed decision-making ecosystem (the focus of our evidence communities portfolio) 5. Increased access to the best evidence (the focus of our evidence synthesis portfolio) 6. Increased use of evidence in decision-making (our desired high-level outcome) We are interested in all of these domains operating at any/all individual, team, organisational, or systems levels. Note that these domains are closely linked to our theory of change, which has been developed and refined over many years in close discussion with a wide range of ACE stakeholders. This is in line with MSC methods (see Box 1 below for more).
Step 3 **Defining the reporting period**	MSC and SOC approaches have to be applied with a timeframe in mind and must be informed by existing resources. It is important to remember that these approaches draw heavily on your relationships and networks and cannot be implemented independently of the stakeholders with whom you work. The process of reporting SOCs also builds new resources, relationships, and networks. ACE's current plan is included in section 4 below.
Step 4 **Collecting stories of change**	It is important to have a plan that includes effective quality control mechanisms to ensure that the information content is accurate, relevant, and representative. For the use in formal research, ACE has ethics approval from our university's research ethics board that covers our collection, analysis, and reporting of SOCs.
Step 5 **Reviewing the stories within the organisational hierarchy**	A crucial part of the MSC process is the regular review of SOCs. The recommendation is that this review takes place with a range of people across the organisation's hierarchy. The argument is that this process of review can add four specific strengths to the process of collecting and analysing stories of change: • To make explicit what individuals and wider groups value as significant change • To broaden understanding of what is seen as significant change in a project or program as a whole • To abstract and synthesise common elements of significant change • To provide a source of evaluation information to stakeholders. At this point, ACE's review of SOCs includes staff members at all levels of our organisation and across our portfolios. We have not yet engaged more widely with our stakeholders in this process. The exception to this is that we do regularly share overviews of SOCs about the AEN with our members via an online gallery.

Step 6 **Providing stakeholders with regular feedback about the review process**	The MSC approach requires a process of regular feedback about the review process in order to: • Inform each subsequent round of story collection and selection • Effectively record and adjust the direction of attention and the criteria used to value events • Deepen organisational learning about the changes engendered by the project or program ACE holds quarterly review meetings and is considering how best to engage our wider stakeholders.
Step 7 **Setting in place a process to verify the stories, if necessary**	Verification of SOCs is important if we are to have confidence in our data. In verifying SOCs, we aim to: • Check that stories have been reported accurately and honestly • Provide an opportunity to gather more detailed information about events seen as especially significant ACE currently collects additional 'evidence' to support SOCs. This ranges from requests for written evidence such as emails, letters, minutes, or other related documents to photos of events or additional accounts from others involved.
Step 8 **Quantification**	The MSC approach recommends quantification of the extent of changes within SOCs. The argument is that by including quantitative information as well as qualitative information, you are able to measure and report change more effectively. In theory, quantification also enables a comparison of changes that have taken place in one location with changes that have taken place in other locations within a specified period. MSC is only one part of ACE's wider MEL system. Our system includes a number of quantitative indicators. For this reason, we exclusively use MSC as a qualitative tool for measuring change at this point. We will continue to reflect on this decision and consider whether quantification within our use of MSC might be helpful.
Step 9 **Conducting secondary analysis of the stories en masse**	It is a key step within the MSC approach that secondary analysis of your collection of SOCs is conducted because doing so enables you to: • Identify main themes and differences among stories • Theorise about change • Encourage further publication via articles, conference papers, etc In ACE, this secondary analysis takes place routinely as part of our quarterly reflection meetings. Our intention is to also hold dedicated (possibly annual) workshops to conduct analysis to inform writing of papers on what we are learning. Thus far we have conducted one such exercise (in late 2021) focussing on our AEN SOCs with a dedicated researcher allocated to the task. That has resulted in a draft paper which is currently being refined for publication.
Step 10 **Revising the Most Significant Change process**	As with many research processes, it is recommended that you regularly reflect on your MSC process. The aim is to revise your plans to take into account what has been learned from your experience. ACE has an annual review built into its MEL design which includes a review of MSC approach to analysis.

Box 1: Selecting domains for MSC

"**The first task in MSC is normally to introduce a range of stakeholders to the technique, and thereby gain their interest in, and ownership over, the process. Stakeholders may include project or programme staff, staff at other levels of an organisation, targeted beneficiaries**, **and donor representatives, amongst others.**

After that [introduction], **the next task is to identify, with stakeholders, some** domains of change – **typically between three and five – that will be monitored (or evaluated). Domains are broad areas where change might be expected to occur. In MSC they are not precisely defined but are instead deliberately left open to interpretation.**

Domains may be designed to capture change at many different levels, such as individual, community, or organisational level. Examples of domains **might include** changes in **the quality of peoples' lives**, **organisational culture**, **and** in the **way villagers interact with each other**".

Source: https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Most-significant-change.pdf

3. ACE's current Most Significant Change and Stories of Change tools

The following section of this manual describes the various tools we use to action the collection and analysis of our SOCs. Questions covered in the following section include the process for sourcing and selecting SOCs and the process followed when collecting a story of change.

a) Where do ideas for stories come from?

Previously, under the University of Johannesburg-led Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence programme, the SOC lead (Natalie Tannous) and later the Africa Evidence Network programme officer (Precious Motha) would lookout for interesting accounts of people reaching out to one another at conferences or over email which would indicate a possible story. They would also regularly prompt team members to share any such instances with them. Pre-COVID we would hear such anecdotes from team members at a weekly in-person meeting, from AEN members via emails, from government colleagues and other partners at workshops or training sessions. These anecdotes would be shared with those responsible for collecting SOCs who would then follow up. As we are now expanding the approach to all of ACE, and since we work remotely, we involve more people and provide a wider range of opportunities for identifying possible stories.

We have identified the following four ways to identify possible stories. We have agreed that in all cases, 'potential stories' should be captured centrally, as well as those we set out to collect. This way we have a record of all potential stories and may revisit and follow up with some later.

1. Via ACE staff following regular prompting from our MEL team (Linda Morailane and Kekeletso Makau)
2. Via our partners and AEN members, often following prompting from ACE staff but also volunteered from others

3. Identified in social media interactions during our flagship events: Africa Evidence Week and EVIDENCE which take place alternately each year
4. When our MEL system triggers a request for a Story of Change. These situations are detailed in our wider MEL system. For example, when ACE has delivered services to the same government client over a period of time, we deliberately request an opportunity for follow up interviews and access to any relevant documentation with the specific intention of learning about change.

b) How do we decide which stories to collect?

Deciding which of the proposed stories to collect is based on whether that story fits within our theory of change and whether it relates to one of our domains of change.[2]

Our theory of change is laid out in detail in our Integrated Theory of Change and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning document. Essentially, we only collect SOCs that are linked to ACE's activities or those of our delivery partners. These partners are pre-specified based on whether they are working with ACE to deliver ACE-influenced or ACE-funded services in their contexts and countries. New delivery partners are added with agreement from the MEL lead and our ACE director.

To be collected as a story of change, an anecdote must demonstrate an understanding of what:
- Was happening in the context before ACE did its work
- The intervention was that ACE did
- Is now different/what has changed

If these three elements cannot be identified, then it is unlikely that the anecdote is ready yet to be collected as a story of change. Team members submitting anecdotes as potential SOCs have the opportunity to discuss their submission in more detail with the ACE MEL lead. This opportunity is provided because we recognise that stories SOCs may start out as something else. For instance, AEN members may share testimonials suited to marketing purposes which may over time emerge as a SOC. We therefore have a filter that allows anecdotes that do not yet meet our full criteria for MEL data to still be collected and shared via the AEN website.

Whilst domains of change do not have to be rigid and can be considered a useful guide more than anything else, it is important that it is possible to allocate a SOC to one of the pre-identified domains of change. These domains guide how we write up the SOCs, as well as what to look out for when searching for SOCs. The domains of change that ACE is interested in collecting SOCs against are:
1. Increased awareness of ACE's work to advance evidence-informed decision-making (our communications goal)
2. Increased understanding of evidence-informed decision-making (the focus of our art and science of evidence-use portfolio)

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[2] We are also limited by capacity. Our qualitative MEL administrator works half-time and is employed primarily to support the collection of SOCs. The AEN team also have some capacity to support this task, specifically where SOCs relate directly to the AEN's work. Lastly, ACE senior staff may be needed to help facilitate contact with senior colleagues and in some cases to conduct interviews or wider correspondence to collect the relevant information from senior contacts.

3. Increased capacities for evidence-informed decision-making (the focus of our evidence capacities portfolio)
4. Increased connections and collaborations across the evidence-informed decision-making ecosystem (the focus of our evidence communities portfolio)
5. Increased access to the best evidence (the focus of our evidence synthesis portfolio)
6. Increased use of evidence in decision-making (our desired high-level outcome)

All of these domains of change can be at the individual, team, organisational, or systems levels. Over time, we also anticipate being able to separate stories into short, medium- and long- term impact[3].

Practically, we have screening questions to help guide staff on whether or not to submit stories (see below), and whether they should be used only (or also) as marketing stories.

c) Working template of SOCs collection tool

This section shares the current tool being used to collect SOCs at ACE. This tool (Table 3) was co-developed at a SOC workshop on 10 December 2021 using previous templates of former tools (available from the ACE MEL archives).

Before any anecdote is classified as a story of change, each anecdote should go through a screening process. The MEL administrator completes the rest of the form as the interview is progressing only once an anecdote has passed this screening process.

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[3] Note that when considering potential for long-term impact, we reflect back on activities from previous years and go back to speak to relevant stakeholders to hear if there has been medium- or long-term impacts from those we have worked with since 2014 or even before.

Table 2: template currently used at ACE to collect SOC

SCREENING PHASE (COMPLETED BY PERSON SUBMITTING THE STORY):
(A) Person submitting the story of change name & email address:
To ascertain whether or not your story of change counts as a story of change for collection, please answer the following questions.
1)   Has ACE played a role in this SOC? YES/NO
2)   Does the potential impact of this SOC relate to reducing poverty and inequality in Africa?[4] YES/NO
3)   Does this story relate to one of your MEL indicators? YES/NO
If not all the answers are yes, this submission is recorded as a potential story of change and the person submitting the story receives the following redirect message: *If you cannot answer yes to all questions, then your story is not quite ready for collection. We will record your story as one to follow up on within a month of this submission. If you feel strongly that your story must be collected now, please email the MEL lead.*

DATA COLLECTION PHASE (COMPLETED BY MEL ADMINISTRATOR DURING INTERVIEW):
(1) Is this an AEN member testimonial? *(Select an option)* YES/NO
(2) Do you want to promote/publicise this story of change? *(Select an option)* YES/NO *If yes, make a note to contact ACE coms.*
(3) *(When the source person is an ACE team member)* What MEL indicator/s do you think this story relates to? *(Free text)*
(4) Biographical details of the people involved in this story. *(Free text)*
(5) Social media handles of individuals and organisations involved in this story. *(Free text)*
(6) Please tell this story in your own words. Some guiding questions might include: *(Free text answer. The imagined purpose of this question is to orient the data collector to the story, and to collect qualitative data that may be useful for thematic analysis or marketing purposes)* -   What is the timeline of this story? -   Does this story relate to your individual experience or the experience of your organisation? -   Describe the stakeholders involved in this story. -   Describe the role ACE played in how this story played out.
(7) Think about the specific actions that took place in the story. List these below. *(Free text)*
(8) Looking at your above list, categorise where possible the various actions according to the six mechanisms of supporting evidence-use in decision-making.

Actions from story	Mechanism 1: Awareness – Building awareness and positive attitudes towards evidence use	Mechanism 2 Agree – Building mutual understanding and agreement on policy-relevant questions and the kind of evidence needed to answer them	Mechanism 3 Access and Communication – Providing communication of, and access to, evidence	Mechanism 4 Interact – Facilitating interactions between decision-makers and researchers	Mechanism 5 Skills – Supporting decision-makers to develop skills accessing and making sense of evidence	Mechanism 6 Structure and Process – Influencing decision-making structures and processes
List actions here	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant
List actions here	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant
List actions here	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant	Add further details where relevant

(9) What outcome changed in this story? / What was different because of the above actions?

(10) Based on your answers above, how would you categorise your story of change? *(Select all that apply)*
 	
-    This is a story about
      o   building/advancing collaborations
      o   policies being based on evidence
      o   decision-making systems changing to incorporate/support the use of evidence for decisions

(11) Please provide the outputs/evidence to support this story. *(File upload)*

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[4] People submitting an anecdote for consideration as a SOC are asked to refer back to ACE's theory of change in which we track how our activities contribute to changes to poverty and inequality. Writing a blog about evidence-use, can for example, contribute to reducing poverty and inequality.

4. Timeline for collecting SOCs and applying the MSC approach to analysis in 2022

Below (Table 3) is an outline of the overall timing of collecting SOCs and analysing them using the MSC approach from January until December 2022. The table details the phases of collection, when reflection workshops are scheduled to happen, and when outputs are expected to be produced.

	JAN - MAR	APR - JUN	JULY-SEP	OCT- DEC
PHASES OF COLLECTION	First quarter phase of eliciting and collecting stories of change.	Second quarter phase of eliciting and collecting stories of change.	Third quarter* phase of eliciting and collecting stories of change. *Note that with EVIDENCE scheduled for 19-21 September, this gives the opportunity to identify potential stories from social media monitoring.*	Last quarter phase of eliciting and collecting stories of change.
REFLECTION WORKSHOPS	**Late March:** reflection workshop for wider team.	**Late June:** reflection workshop – including analysis for MSC.	**Late September/early October:** reflection workshop for wider team.	**Early December:** reflection and consolidation workshop – reflecting on methods, refining the approach, and consolidating MSC findings.
OUTPUTS	Overview report on Q1 and refining of our manual. Feed into AEN, PEERSS, and funder reports.	Overview report on Q2 and refining of our manual. Feed into AEN, PEERSS, and funder reports. Identification of outputs (for AEN gallery) and potential discussion of events at EVIDENCE 2022.	Overview report on Q3 and refining of our manual. Feed into AEN, PEERSS, and funder reports. Preparation and writing of marketing testimonials in the build-up to EVIDENCE 2022. Drafting of preliminary paper based on analysis of learning so far.	Overview report on first year and refining of our manual. Feed into AEN, PEERSS, and funder reports. Planning writing outputs based on year of using this approach: - Updated gallery - MEL report - Methods paper - Outputs paper

5. Helpful resources to learn more

- The Most Significant Change Technique.
- The Most Significant Change technique: A manual for M&E staff and others at Equal Access
- The Power of Stories Enriching Program Research and Reporting
- Using Stories of Change to Monitor and Evaluate Impacts of the Techno Gabay Program in Eastern Visayas, Philippines
- Stories for Change: A systematic approach to participatory monitoring
- Most Significant Change Stories: Zimbabwe Emergency Drought Mitigation Operation for Livestock Project
- An evolutionary approach to facilitating organisational learning: an experiment by the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh
- The Most Significant Change: Using participatory video for monitoring and evaluation.
- Use of most significant change (MSC) technique to evaluate health promotion training of maternal community health workers in Cianjur district, Indonesia

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