



Capturing most significant change stories from the Africa RISING project in Ethiopia

Key messages

- Qualitative evidence is important to promote Africa RISING outcomes.
- The most significant change (MSC) approach is a way to systematically collect qualitative information.
- It provides a mechanism for many project actors to specify their outcomes and their measures of progress; these complement or may challenge the project leaders.
- Our experiences shows that MSC is powerful in fostering learning and improvement.

About MSC

Conventional monitoring and evaluation tools set predefined indicators of outcomes. This is usually just a quantitative process. They count measurable at predefined moments in the life of a project. These are supposed to verify that certain activities have been successfully completed and point to any obstacles to success. They typically verify that technologies have been introduced or that particular crop varieties have been adopted.

The MSC approach complements more quantitative approaches, giving richer and more complete insights about outcomes from Africa RISING interventions. It records what beneficiaries and other actors in a project see as 'significant' changes in their eyes. It is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. It allows cross-triangulation, verifying the veracity of collected data; it helps planners adjust the course of their activities in response to constructive feedback; and it challenges many untested assumptions upon which convention interventions are based.

The approach actively and continuously engages stakeholders, and includes their perspectives on the achievement of goals. It captures how learning among stakeholders has taken place and creates systems for different groups to understand each other's goals and aspirations. Employed during a project, it may capture unexpected or undesirable changes that the project needs to address.

MSC in Africa RISING

Once the decision was made in early 2014 to use the approach in Ethiopia, a range of stakeholders and local partners in the various innovation platforms (mechanisms at local level where different stakeholders interact and work together) were introduced to the approach. In most cases, an M&E champion from each platform volunteered and was selected to work with the approach. They then worked with individuals to identify and record the change stories.

The project looked for stories associated with seven 'domains of change': climate-smart development, gender integration, improved nutrition, increased income from agriculture, private sector engagement, research and capacity building. It also sought out other unintended outcomes or innovations that would otherwise not be picked up by the formal M&E system. Platform members discussed these change areas together so they could develop shared understandings of what they think constitutes change as opposed to changes defined by researchers.

MSC example story

Habtamu Hagos works for the office of agriculture in Endamehoni district. He was aware of Africa RISING interventions from the outset and later got very much involved when he joined the district office of agriculture in 2013. He contributed to site selection for research interventions and he participated in evaluations of trials on wheat, faba bean and potato interventions.

“During the end-season evaluation of the first trials, I saw an unprecedented harvest of 94 quintals/hectare of wheat and 528 quintals/hectare of potato, never seen before in Tigray region. The highest regional productivity we had seen for wheat was 74 quintals per hectare some eight years ago on a model farmer plot. We documented the experimental process, especially input use and management practices to use as ‘benchmark’ for the five-year *woreda* agriculture office plan. We captured the process as an example of ‘best practice’, included pictures and shared it with partners. Some researchers were sceptical about as they had never seen yields like these before. However, our documentation made it clear what was achievable. It is even being used as a benchmark for the region to scale up practices to other farm households.

The significance of Africa RISING research is that it has defied this thinking in some of our experts. Evidence-based planning has always been our gap. Using local research evidence for our local planning has also contributed to changing this trend. We don’t need to refer to evidence from elsewhere. The management and agronomic practices we learned while documenting the process have also been instrumental in developing our capacity. Our *woreda* office has also been commended at the regional level for coming up with evidence that can be scaled out to other parts of the region”.

Findings

- The MSC approach allowed Africa RISING to discover and share expected and unexpected outcomes.
- The process has empowered actors to analyze data and conceptualize impacts, from different perspectives.
- It has become an important way to tell success stories.
- It allows actors to define and evaluate their own ‘changes’ in their specific situations, rather than have other definitions of success imposed on them.
- Local partners have different perception on what constitutes change. More work is needed in participation to prevent potential stories from being lost.
- The MSC approach is time-consuming since engagement takes place over the life of the project.

The Africa Research In Sustainable Intensification for the Next Generation (Africa RISING) program comprises three research-for-development projects supported by the United States Agency for International Development as part of the U.S. government’s Feed the Future initiative.

Through action research and development partnerships, Africa RISING will create opportunities for smallholder farm households to move out of hunger and poverty through sustainably intensified farming systems that improve food, nutrition, and income security, particularly for women and children, and conserve or enhance the natural resource base.

The three projects are led by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (in West Africa and East and Southern Africa) and the International Livestock Research Institute (in the Ethiopian Highlands). The International Food Policy Research Institute leads an associated project on monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment.

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