



# Learning about Gender Equality

Testing the ability of the Most Significant Change methodology to make cultural changes visible and learn about gender equality

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# Learning about Gender Equality

Monitoring and evaluation systems make it possible for organizations to determine whether their programs are having the desired impact and achieving the changes they set out to create. These systems help us determine whether we are taking the right actions to reach our various objectives. Consequently, we can adjust our strategies accordingly and be held accountable for our work.

Ideally,

Throughout the international development sector, organizations are struggling to build effective and efficient monitoring and evaluation systems that facilitate useful data collection and analysis. One of the areas in which these systems are providing limited insight, however, is that of cultural change in gender relations.

Oxfam Novib's Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership Trajectory aims to incite cultural change, but, until recently, the monitoring and evaluation tools at hand were not able to capture those changes. In a search to find appropriate tools to make cultural change visible, we experimented with the Most Significant Change methodology. This report presents the main findings of this action research as well as the associated lessons that may be beneficial to others facing similar issues.

Through this experiment, we have come to the conclusion that the Most Significant Change methodology brings additional value to our current monitoring and evaluation system and to that of our partner organization. The methodology helped us collect evidence of behavioural and attitudinal changes regarding gender equality. It encouraged critical reflection and learning on the way we look at these types of changes and on the strategies we use to promote gender equality.

It has been exciting to hear from women who are no longer looked at with disdain, but recognized as important agents of change. Equally encouraging were the stories of men who changed their perception of the abilities of their female colleagues and now see them as equally capable.

We also realized that this methodology brings its own challenges. Time, as well as human and financial resources, has to be made available to put the methodology into practice. Using the methodology also requires a new way of working. Instead of dealing with a linear chain of results, there is a need to find space to have an open discussion about significant changes that can be attributed to a program and how to support these changes. An open attitude towards discussing strategies and learning from successes and mistakes is essential. These are serious challenges in a rapidly changing development sector that faces an ever growing demand for quick and quantifiable results and increasing competition for available funding.

As agents of development, Oxfam Novib and our partner organizations are driven to support positive change. We are continuously seeking new ways of coming closer to our goal: a just world without poverty. The experiment with the Most Significant Change methodology has inspired us to rethink and improve our ways of working. I hope this publication will do the same for you.

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# Introduction

Oxfam Novib's experiment with the Most Significant Change Methodology (MSC), described in this publication, took place in the context of the Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership Trajectory (GMLT). The trajectory aims to create evidence-based change towards greater gender justice sensitivity and practice in Oxfam Novib's partner organizations, in their programs and in the communities they work with.

In the course of implementing GMLT, it became clear that the GMLT monitoring revealed above all *technical and tangible* changes which were taking place, such as the formulation of gender policies and staff training on gender issues. While GMLT aims to achieve these *tangible* changes, it also strives to create *intangible* changes. Gender equality is rooted in deeply held cultural norms and exclusionary practices which are reflected in the beliefs, behaviours and attitudes of people, organizations and institutions, and while changes in those beliefs, behaviours and attitudes are not easily seen and are rather intangible, they are an essential goal of GMLT.

Initial GMLT monitoring used the Gender Traffic Light in combination with GMLT indicators. The Gender Traffic Light provides a gender analysis at the organizational level. It asks program officers of Oxfam Novib for example to score an organization on the following question: *'Do the annual reports of the past 2 years about the programs/projects contain sex-disaggregated data?'* The answer could be 'yes', 'partly' or 'no'. Like the Gender Traffic Light, GMLT indicators are quantitative and mostly technical in nature.

They may refer, for example, to the number of women in senior positions in an organization or to the number of organizations that have a gender justice policy in place.

Looking at the GMLT monitoring tools, it became clear that additional tools were needed to collect information to make intangible changes visible. The Most Significant Change methodology, being participatory and qualitative in nature, was selected as an opportune complementary monitoring tool in the context of GMLT for its ability to highlight the beliefs, behaviours and attitudes of people, organizations and institutions.

An experiment named the Measuring Milestones Initiative was designed to gain knowledge and expertise on the usefulness of adding MSC to the existing GMLT monitoring and evaluation tools in order to make intangible cultural changes visible. Since the methodology was described in various publications as particularly useful to encourage learning, the experiment explored the extent to which MSC encouraged learning related to gender equality.

The first part of this publication focuses on the usefulness of the Most Significant Change methodology to make intangible, and particularly cultural, changes visible.

The second part illustrates how the MSC process encourages inspiring gender equality learning opportunities.

The third part nuances the MSC's added value to GMLT monitoring by pointing out challenges that were dealt with in the experiment.

Since the experiment led to the conclusion that MSC can be of added value for monitoring and evaluation, this publication wishes to invite readers to consider whether the methodology could also be useful for them. The last part of this report provides considerations to help assess the potential usefulness of the methodology to readers' work.

The experiment with MSC has given participants renewed energy to share, debate and embrace the complexity of changing gender power relations. Throughout the experiment, inspiring, encouraging and stimulating stories and conversations emerged. People from different countries and different organizations shared stories of change to deepen and revise their understandings of how best to foster greater gender equality. Hopefully this publication will pass on some of that energy to readers.

# The Most Significant Change methodology

The Most Significant Change methodology,<sup>1</sup> developed by Rick Davies and others through the 1990s, is a qualitative form of participatory monitoring and evaluation.

- It is **qualitative** because it is based on stories.
- It is **participatory** because different stakeholders are involved in collecting and analyzing the data.
- It is a form of **monitoring** because it occurs throughout the program cycle and provides information to help people manage the program.
- It contributes to **evaluation** because it provides data on impact and outcomes that can be used to help assess the performance of the program as a whole.

The full methodology contains 10 steps:

- 1) Starting and raising interest
- 2) Defining domains of change
- 3) Defining the reporting period
- 4) Collecting significant change stories
- 5) Selecting the most significant change stories
- 6) Feeding back the results of the selection process
- 7) Verifying the stories
- 8) Quantifying
- 9) Doing a secondary analysis
- 10) Revising the system

As a monitoring and evaluation tool, MSC is described as *'best suited to monitoring that focuses on learning rather than just accountability'* and an appropriate tool *'when you are interested in the effect of an intervention on people's lives and keen to include the words of non-professionals'*<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The description of the MSC methodology in this chapter is adapted from The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique; A Guide to Its Use by Rick Davies and Jess Dart: [www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf](http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.pdf).

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<sup>2</sup> The 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) Technique; A Guide to Its Use by Rick Davies and Jess Dart (p13)

## Measuring Milestones Initiative

In 2010, 20 partner organizations and 12 gender consultants from 12 different countries were trained in MSC to kick-off the experiment with the methodology. After the workshop, participants were asked to start using the methodology.

This meant collecting stories, selecting the most significant change story and providing feedback about the selection process to the story collector. One year after the training session, participants met again to discuss their experiences with the methodology. They discussed the advantages and challenges of using the methodology for monitoring gender mainstreaming.

In early 2012, Oxfam Novib, three partner organizations and one gender consultant from Bangladesh undertook a second round of story collection and selection to gain deeper knowledge of the usefulness of the methodology for the monitoring and evaluation of GMLT. In the meantime, the significant change stories that were collected in the first year of the experiment were used for a secondary analysis.

The different activities made it possible to collect information on the usefulness of MSC to make intangible, cultural change visible and to learn about gender equality. The challenges that hindered MSC implementation were documented carefully to get a realistic understanding of the usefulness of the methodology. Both opportunities and challenges are reflected in this publication.

The three steps of story collection, selection and secondary analysis proved to be particularly useful to make cultural change visible and encourage learning. To illustrate the usefulness of the methodology to make cultural change visible, this publication uses examples from these three activities.

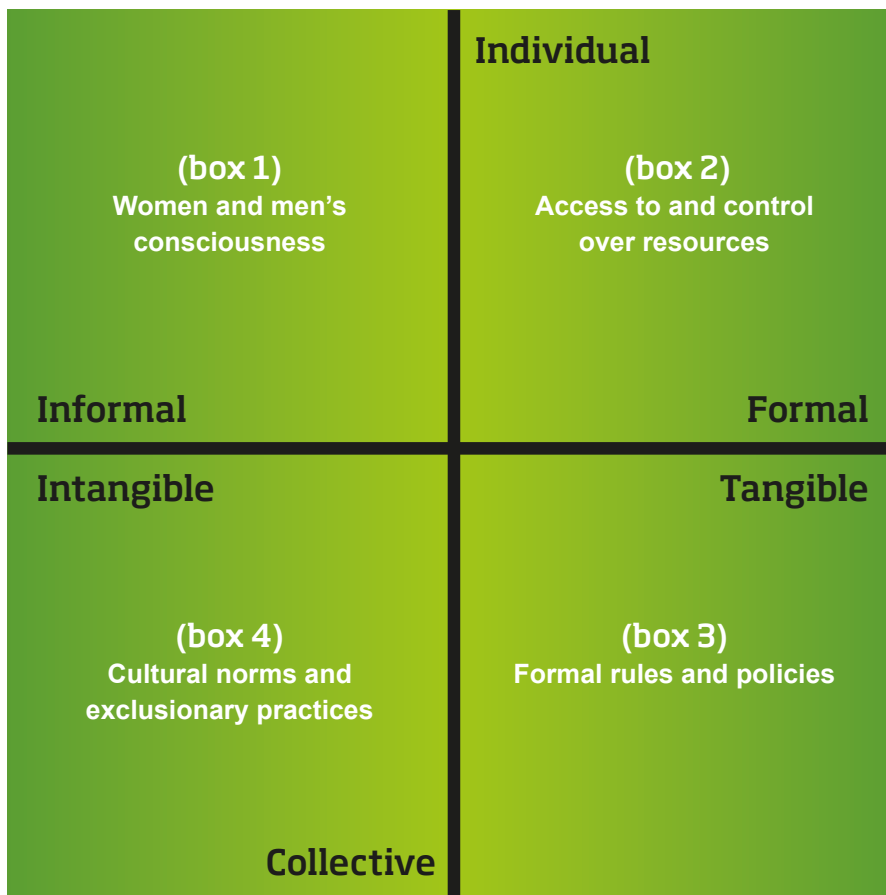


Part 1

# Making cultural change visible



**Diagram 1:** Gender at Work Framework



## Cultural change

Making intangible cultural changes visible was the driving force behind the experiment with the Most Significant Change methodology. The concept of intangible and cultural change resulting from the Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership Trajectory can be explained with the Gender at Work framework<sup>3</sup> presented in Diagram 1.

To work on sustainable change towards greater gender justice, changes in all four boxes of this diagram are considered necessary. In other words, individual and collective changes, as well as tangible and intangible changes, need to occur when successfully working towards gender justice. In the GMLT self-assessment 12 boxes tool, elements about prevailing cultural norms and deep structure were therefore deliberately included, with the aim to bring them out in the analysis and subsequently make the organisation act upon it. To assess GMLT's impact towards gender justice, monitoring tools also need to provide information about change in all four boxes of the framework.

One may ask how GMLT can be expected to lead to change in all four boxes. The answer is illustrated in Diagram 2 (see page 10). First, with proper resources such as financial support, a self-assessment tool and expertise, counterparts engage in a systematic self-reflection process in which they assess the state of gender dynamics within their organizations and programs (box 2).

The self-assessment is expected to lead to a new understanding of gender in the context of their individual practices (box 1). Partner organizations are then expected to undertake specific initiatives to change relationships between women and men in the organization and in its programs, such as the adoption of a gender policy or a standard gender analysis in program design and management (box 3). The new understanding of gender among individual staff members, coupled with changes in organizational policy, should contribute to change in the generally accepted though often unacknowledged beliefs, behaviours and attitudes within the organization (box 4). Ultimately, the changed practice and policy of organizations should lead to change in the lives of the women and men in the organization's constituency.

The Gender Traffic Light and GMLT indicators provide evidence of the tangible changes occurring on the right side of the Gender at Work framework, in boxes 2 and 3. For example, the GMLT indicator *'Number of trainings/workshops connected to GMLT'* shows evidence of change categorized in box 2. The Gender Traffic Light question *'Does the organization have a (good) internal Gender Justice policy?'* can lead to evidence of change occurring in box 3. Whether an organization and its staff have reviewed their understanding of gender equality and changed their behaviours and attitudes accordingly, remains, however, hidden. The lack of information on intangible changes occurring as a result of GMLT leads to the following question:

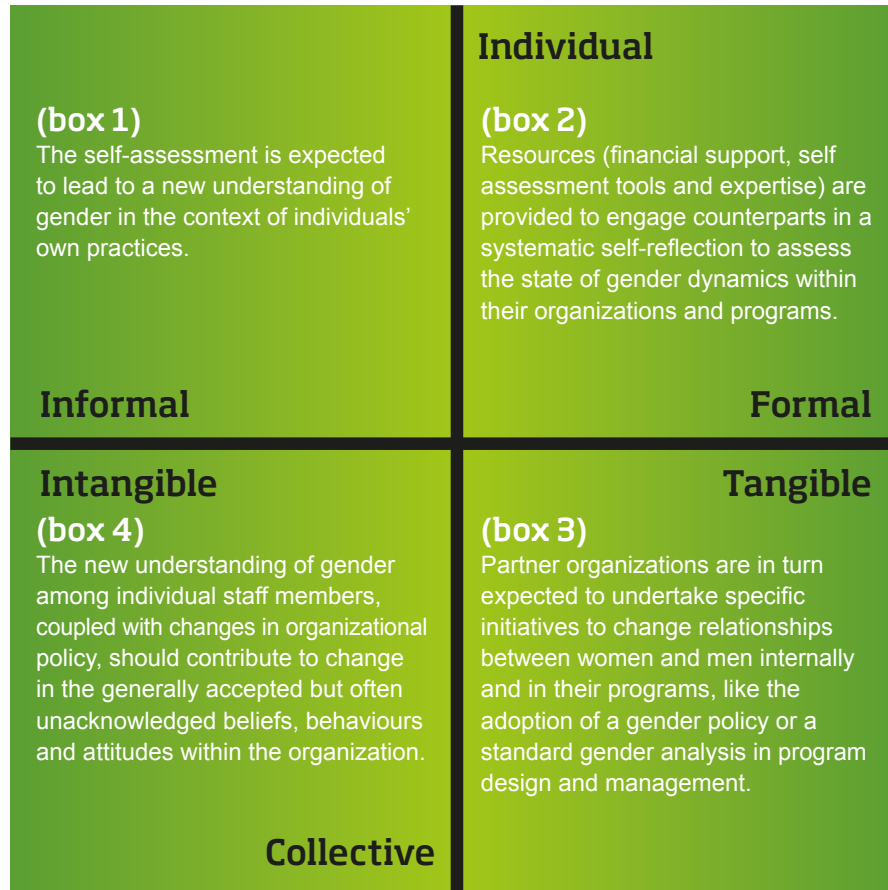
**Can the Most Significant Change methodology identify information about change occurring in the left side of the Gender at Work framework, in particular cultural change?**

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<sup>3</sup> What is Gender at Work's Approach to Gender Equality and Institutional Change?' by Aruna Rao, David Kelleher (2001) [http://www.gendematwork.org/sites/gendematwork.org/files/resources/Gender\\_at\\_Works\\_Approach.pdf](http://www.gendematwork.org/sites/gendematwork.org/files/resources/Gender_at_Works_Approach.pdf)

**Diagram 2:**

The intervention logic behind GMLT, described in the Gender at Work framework



## Making cultural change visible with Most Significant Change

One of the key strengths of the Most Significant Change Methodology, and the reason it can be so useful to organizations like Oxfam Novib and its partners, is its ability to make cultural change visible. It does so through its various intrinsic elements, described in this section.

### Rich descriptions

It is through the rich descriptions they provide that change stories make intangible changes visible. Those rich descriptions are captured because change stories start from the personal experience and observations of story tellers, and because the format requires them to explain why a change was significant for them.

The fragment below Diagram 3 illustrates such a rich description, in which intangible changes at organizational level are captured in a change story. This story describes how, since the implementation of GMLT, an organization's management has changed its attitude towards female staff, and how women in senior positions now feel more confident to execute their tasks. In this case, the GMLT indicator *'Number of women staff in senior positions / decision-making positions at organizational level'* provides information about the formal and individual element of the change process (box 2).

The change story, on the other hand, makes it possible to identify information about intangible changes related to the process.

Since partner organizations were free to collect stories from within and outside their organizations, similar rich descriptions of change resulting from GMLT were also captured at the level of communities.

A fragment from such a story is presented below, and describes attitudinal and behavioural changes in religious and community leaders regarding the inclusion of women in conflict mitigation.

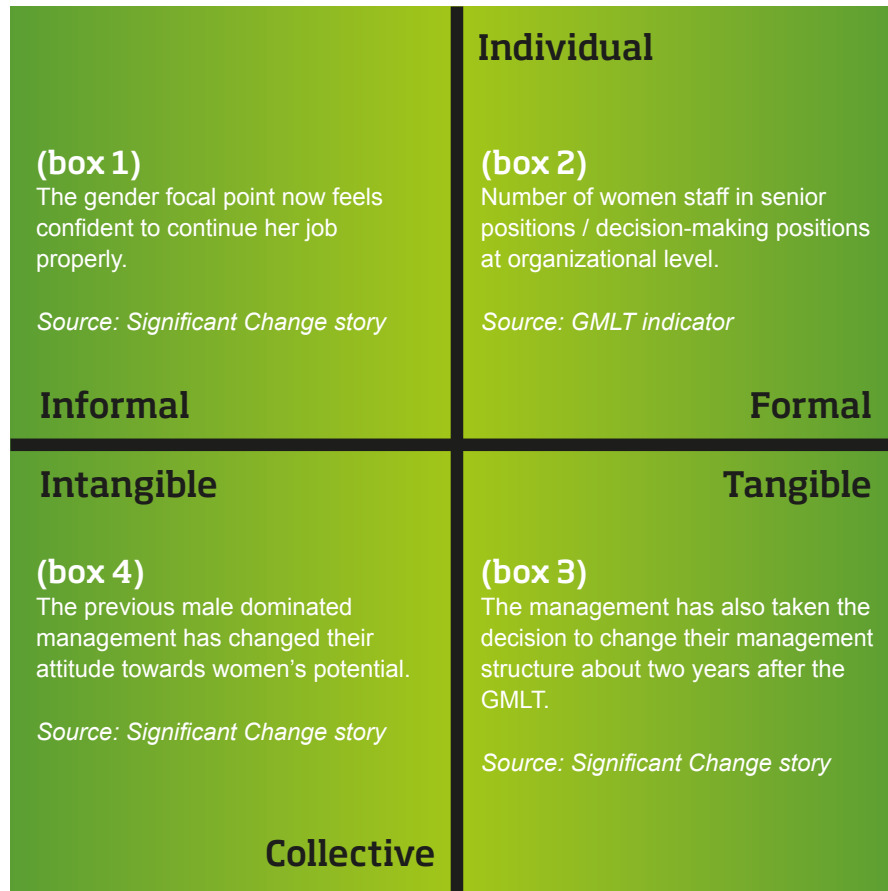
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*'Women were never involved in settling conflicts, until 2009 when [the organization] began activities with our community. As a result of these enlightenment activities, I found it necessary to convene a meeting involving women (with the consent of their husbands) to discuss ways of minimizing conflicts. Initially, there was resistance from some religious and traditional leaders, but over time and with continued explanation, this was overcome. The women themselves gathered courage to contribute immensely on the issues, to the surprise of every male attendant. The rate of conflicts has since reduced significantly as a result of this development.'* (Nigeria)

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**Diagram 3:**

Changes experienced by a GMLT participant, categorized according to the Gender at Work framework



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'The management has also taken the decision to change their management structure about two years after the GMLT. It was a long discussion among the management of [the organization]. Before the GMLT, any decisions were taken by the Executive Director himself. However, now it has been changed totally. The previous male dominated management has changed their attitude towards women's potential. The woman staff who was promoted to a senior position and became the gender focal point now feels confident to continue her job properly. She is now trying to create a gender friendly environment in the workplace. Now a gender balanced leadership can make a positive change within the organization's culture.' (Nigeria)<sup>4</sup>

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## Appealing voices

Adding to the rich descriptions found in change stories, the voices that are captured in the stories are convincing and help to identify intangible changes. Story tellers include their personal feelings and reflections about changes in stories. They use their own words to describe these changes. The methodology demands story collectors to respect the voice of the story teller. This makes it possible to listen to voices and include perspectives that are rarely heard.

The usefulness of an appealing voice is perhaps best illustrated by presenting fragments of change stories.

The first fragment, which comes from a story told in Nigeria, describes how a woman noticed that her community started to look at her differently after she successfully took part in a microcredit program. GMLT gave her the opportunity to use her new status to become a leader.

The second fragment comes from Ethiopia, and reveals the story of a woman whose day-to-day situation changed for the better after she took part in sustainable land use activities.

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'People no longer look at me with disdain. Rather, I am now reckoned with as an influential person and a well established entrepreneur. No more was I or women in the group referred to as 'alaini' (those that don't have) or 'akusee' (paupers). I can tell you that success is good. (...)

Until recently, I presided as chairperson in the community association, thanks to [organization] for the gender mainstreaming training where they stressed on women taking up leadership roles. In the past it used to be men in the saddle of every group since they are thought to be better thinkers and administrators compared to us women. In early 2011, I stepped down, to become an individual borrower. Another woman stepped in as the chairperson. (...)

Now, I, the formerly famished woman, have built my own 3 bedroom bungalow, own an adire workshop and showroom equipped with sewing machines, tailoring materials and have five apprentices working for me on a monthly salary of [x] each.' (Nigeria)

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<sup>4</sup> The change stories collected in the experiment are archived by Oxfam Novib's Innovation team Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning. To safeguard the privacy of story tellers, story collectors and respective organization, the stories presented in this publication are made anonymous.

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'My name is [x]. I am 40 years old and a mother of four children (one female). In the previous years, my husband was very arrogant and beating me and my children. I was not allowed to share any decision in any household activities. (...) I used to work different and monotonous activities alone without any support from my husband. (...)

Since July 2008, [organization] intervened in gender mainstreaming practice in addition to its natural resource management and sustainable land use activities. Community conversion and experience exchange visits on gender mainstreaming were conducted for selected community members (male and female). Accordingly, I knew my rights and responsibilities, and also my husband's attitude changed and became committed towards gender equality and he stopped beating me.

Currently, my husband and I are sharing any household duties and agricultural activities without any gender demarcation. I also serve as a committee member in natural resource management activities and any social affairs. I indulge myself in self-income generating activities, so that we are now achieving considerable progresses in our living status.' (Ethiopia)

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## Collective analysis of change

The selection process allows a validation of changes described in the stories. In a selection process, selection committee members are invited to rank the stories according to which one they think is most significant. This ranking forces selection members to clarify their choice with arguments. Clarifying this choice, thus making clear what is important to them, was considered more important than 'the most significant story' that remains at the end.

To illustrate the value of a selection process, the following example might be helpful. In this case, the story which was being discussed had been told by a male staff member who had changed his attitude towards his female colleagues.

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'That time one woman colleague worked with me in an equivalent position. At first I thought, 'how could a woman work in a messenger position?' I had negative attitudes. Even then, I helped her. I used to accompany her when she distributed letters to the other offices. I felt uncomfortable to go with her. Sometimes I undermined myself to think 'how can a woman be working in the same position as me?' (...)

In the beginning of 2010, a GMLT workshop was held at my organization. That workshop was exceptional for me. I learned about gender equality and it increased my knowledge and changed my perception, my outlook. It gave me clarity regarding roles and responsibilities of human beings. I understand my wrong interpretation.' (Bangladesh)

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The discussion held during the selection process in which this story was analyzed raised the question of whether the change it highlighted was a unique and individual attitudinal change or whether it represented broader change within the organization. If unique, the change story was to be considered less significant. The discussion led to the conclusion that it was more likely to be a unique change story. It referred to intangible change at the individual level, as opposed to collective change throughout the organization.

However, the discussion did not stop there. Since the selection committee members determined that there was no evidence of collective change in this organization following the introduction of GMLT, they decided that the negative attitude of other male staff towards the capabilities of their female colleagues needed to be addressed to create a gender friendly organization.

In another selection process, one of the stories referred to cultural change in the organization. However, the selection committee questioned whether this change was actually felt by staff members. The selection process made it possible to validate the intangible change at both the individual and organizational levels.

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'[Organization], in its policy making, has attached importance to equal participation of women in the sphere of decision-making and opinion forming. The change of equal participation of women in the field of income generating activities and priority-based advantage for poor and neglected women are really praiseworthy. This positive change is not only confined to [organization] but it is spreading apace far and wide day by day by which the condition and position of women will be basically changed.' (Bangladesh)

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The discussion about the significance of this story revealed that the management of the organization had gone through a drastic attitudinal change towards the role of women in the organization. Women had been given authorization to make decisions on financial issues, and were now left in charge when their male colleagues were out of the office.

The senior male staff had come to realize that their female colleagues were capable of making important decisions and running the organization in their absence. They highlighted the fact that this had made their jobs easier and that it improved the efficiency of the organization. Female staff who took part in this discussion testified that they felt the attitude of management towards their role in the organization had changed. They now felt supported and more confident to execute their tasks, and noticed that more and more male colleagues accepted them as equal. They also felt proud to be part of the gender mainstreaming team that was set up after GMLT. They felt part of a pioneer movement in their organization.

This selection process provided a powerful example of changes occurring in cultural norms and practices within an organization as a result of GMLT.

### **Revealing beliefs and attitudes of participants in the selection process**

The selection process forces participants to explain why a change is significant, which enables a discussion in which the assumptions, beliefs and attitudes of selection committee members are revealed. Another selection process in Bangladesh shows that the discussion and shared analysis is just as important as the validation of changes in the stories.

The discussion, which focused on a story in which a girl was harassed, revealed norms and values of the selection committee members with respect to the appropriate behaviour of girls.

(See transcript on page 17)

### **Creating an understanding of the complexity of cultural change**

The secondary analysis of all change stories collected encouraged a debate among the analysts about what cultural change is and the extent to which GMLT contributes to it.

With the aim to explore whether cultural and deep structural change had taken place in the organizations that participated in the GMLT, a team of three analysts from Oxfam Novib and Gender at Work started the secondary analysis of the 129 English, French and Arabic stories collected in the first year of the experiment. First the stories were read and classified by country, organization, sex of the story teller, subject and problem described in the story, level (individual, household, community or organization), and attribution to GMLT interventions. Then, they were grouped into the four boxes of the Gender at Work framework according to the change they described.

The analysts realized that stories reflected valuable evidence of cultural change, but that this change occurred at different levels. Some stories referred to behavioural and attitudinal change at the household level. Others referred to change within a family or a group of colleagues. The stories show people challenging cultural norms and values, but in the majority of the stories, the extent to which these changes are collectively owned remains unclear. The stories showed that change was happening in the cultural norms and exclusionary practices in which gender equality is rooted, but the depth of this change was difficult to identify.

**Participant 1:** 'I think the second story about the girl who started her own business is most significant. She got help from NGO workers to run her business and was successful. She was victorious and had to step out of the conventional box to do so. The role of the organization is also clear.'

**Participant 2:** 'I agree that it is a significant story, but to me it is not clear enough how she defies her family and was able to break traditional norms. I think the third story is therefore more significant. It explains how a girl, after she was harassed by boys at her school, found the courage to take part in a protest against violence against women. Her classmates were inspired by her. She became a role model.'

**Participant 1:** 'What I think is most significant about this story is that it promotes non-violence. The story also described how the girl eventually forgave her attackers and was not aggressive.'

**Participant 3:** 'I also think the third story is significant, but not because she 'forgave' her attackers. I think that is just another sign of dominating patriarchal values. It is another way to keep our girls and women silent. Like saying; 'They shouldn't cause trouble'.'

(Transcript of a selection process, Bangladesh)

This led to the conclusion that when looking at cultural change resulting from GMLT, it is important not to limit your focus on cultural change as an ultimate 'end stage' characterized by its collective ownership of certain norms and values. When working towards gender justice, one should acknowledge that cultural change is a process of transformation that can go up and down the Gender at Work framework (page 8), move from left to right and in circles, and include tangible and intangible elements touching different levels.

An analysis of the pathways described in the change stories revealed that changes could take different paths. Most of the stories described a change that started with gender equality training (box 2), which had increased participants' awareness of gender roles (box 1). In turn, their new understanding had led to change in the behaviours and/or attitudes of people around them (box 4). This pathway largely overlaps the theory of change behind GMLT, described on page 9.

However, not all stories followed this pathway. Some stories, for example, showed that increased awareness (box1) had led to new policies (box 3), which in turn led to trainings (box 2) which in turn resulted in attitudinal change in an organization (box 4). Eight different pathways leading to culture change were identified by placing the changes described in the stories in the four boxes of the Gender at Work framework.

The analysis of the changes in the stories made it possible to test the logic behind GMLT while acknowledging the complexity of the change process. The fact that the majority of the stories described a change process similar to the logic behind GMLT re-affirmed the validity of the intervention logic. At the same time, the stories that described different pathways than the theory of change behind GMLT were helpful to identify and discuss possible other theories of change. The stories did not offer one conclusive explanation as to how change happens, but highlighted the complexity of changing power relations.

Part 2

# Inspiring dialogue about gender equality



A second motivation to experiment with the Most Significant Change methodology was to explore the extent to which it could foster and inspire learning about gender justice. Story tellers, story collectors, selection committee members and analysts shared the fact that they had experienced motivating moments in the process, in which they had learned about gender equality. They also reported feeling motivated to continue their work.

## Inspiring exchange through collecting and selecting stories

One story collector was inspired by a story in which a woman described how she had asked the organization to include her husband in activities so it would become easier for her to participate. *'I realized we should practice this more often, if not always'*, she explained after collecting the following story:

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*'After my marriage, my dream of being an artist was lost, because the members of my in-law's house did not like me practicing music. They didn't allow me to go in social programs. I had to stop my music practice. Days were passing in that way. (...)*

*I was suffering mentally and psychologically. During that time in 2010, two known persons gave me a proposal of being [member of association]. I had to seek permission from my husband and according to his permission I joined with the group. As a [member] I started to get invitations from many programs, but I couldn't go to all of those as my husband didn't give me permission very easily.*

*Then I thought my husband's perception had to be changed. I took a tactic and told the member of the network to invite my husband in some programs also. They invited him in many programs and we participated together in those programs. After participating in different programs, my husband's perception started to change. He, and as a result his family, started to understand that women should not be confined in one room. (...)*

*Now the situation has changed. Now I can protest any injustice. My husband encourages me and I started my music again.'* (Bangladesh)

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Another story collector had learned about new initiatives at field level. She interviewed a teacher who had once attended one of her organization's gender training sessions. After this training the teacher had decided to start a girls' football team. The story collector had never heard of this initiative before and started to think about how they could inspire more initiatives in which sport was used.

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'One time my thoughts led to the idea that physical strength is necessary for the development of women. Football is not a traditional sport but it can give courage to the girls and also can increase acceptability in society. So I decided to form a girls' football team and discussed my idea with the headmaster of the school. The headmaster was motivated by me and agreed. In May 2011, I formed a girls' football team in cooperation with the headmaster. The members of the football team became skilled team members through regular exercise. (...) Now the football team has become familiar in the Union. Other girls' schools are now trying to follow this example and have taken initiatives to form such football teams. This team is now participating in many tournaments at the Union and district levels.' (Bangladesh)

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In a selection processes with participants from different countries, an engaged debate about what is considered women's leadership was generated. First the members of the selection committee discussed how they understood 'women's leadership'. A list was drafted, and included elements such as these: *'Women's leadership is about women in policy making positions.'* *'Women's leadership is about women participation in public life, and not only in decision making'*. After clarifying the concept with participants, a discussion evolved around three change stories. Selection members heatedly defended their analysis of women's leadership in the stories. They were able to share their vision on women's leadership. Ultimately, the story selected as most significant by participants was selected because *'the woman had changed her economic status as well as political role, because she had a clear vision and goal. As a result she was able to change the relationship between women and men'*.

Not all members agreed on the most significant story. Some considered another story more important, because it described *'how one woman tried to change the lives of other women by working with them and trying to change their awareness and consciousness'*.

The discussion helped participants to better grasp the idea of women's leadership, to analyze different perspectives, and to formulate their own opinions about what they find significant. To describe their feelings about collective analysis and reflection, participants used expressions such as *'inspired'*, *'fully involved'*, *'motivated'*, *'interactive and confused'*, *'engaged in deeper reflection'*, *'actively participated'*, *'deeply reflected'*, *'understands better'*, *'got good learning'*, and *'impressed'* (MSC reflection workshop, Ethiopia). Such words highlight the general appreciation for the group's analysis and learning process.

## Learning about one's role in the change process

Another way in which the story collection and selection process led to animated exchanges about promoting gender equality was by enabling individual participants and organizations to reflect on their own role in change processes.

Some story tellers said they had learned that their change story has value and is important.

They explained that they had become aware of their role in promoting change in gender equality. They were used to getting their inspiration for the promotion of gender equality from the life stories of famous national role models. Now they felt encouraged to know that they could also share their own change stories with others, because their story was also significant.

The woman presented in the story below now actively shares her own story in her community to inspire others.

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'Less than 20 years ago, at a very early age, [a young woman] got married by her own choice. She was studying in class 8. Few days after the marriage she realized the practical situation of life. All her dreams, along with associated emotions, ended because of traditional family culture. Her education was stopped and her mobility was restricted. She tried to obey all the decisions and instructions of her husband, father in-law and mother in-law, like a rural housewife. But everyday she felt these were not fair.

In 2008, [she] was involved with the micro credit group of a partner NGO of our network. She became a member of a women volunteer group. She started to convince her husband to break the restriction of going out from the house. She was able to get permission with her strong willpower. She became an active volunteer and participated in trainings on gender issues, and different dialogues, discussions and campaign events on protecting girls and women from early marriage, sexual harassment and domestic violence, and on the issue of increasing women's participation in decision-making.' (Bangladesh)

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Selection processes also ignited engaged and motivating discussions about individuals' and organizations' roles in gender equality promotion. This is significant because, to promote gender equality, one needs to feel validated in their own role to be able to deal with the constant struggle against deep-rooted beliefs at different levels. This process can be frustrating and create doubt if initiatives are not felt to be leading anywhere. In the situation below, the Most Significant Change process stimulated and motivated an employee to continue to work towards gender equality.

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'Hearing and discussing change stories has made me aware that I also play a role in the process of gender mainstreaming. The stories show real change and I play a role in these changes. I tend to think about gender mainstreaming as something outside myself. It was something that I explained to others. Now I realize I am part of very inspiring changes. I could also be a story teller.'

(Staff partner organization, Bangladesh)

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Part 3

# The usefulness of the Most Significant Change: Lessons learned



When looking to evaluate results of the Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership Trajectory and to make its incurred changes visible, MSC completes the picture painted by GMLT indicators and the Gender Traffic Light. Where for example the GMLT indicators have value in showing technical and tangible changes of GMLT, MSC has proven to be particularly useful to bring out intangible changes that are more qualitative in nature.

The rich descriptions and powerful voices in change stories, analyzed and validated in the selection process and during a secondary analysis, have revealed meaningful information about changes in beliefs, attitudes and behaviours as a result of GMLT.

The voices and descriptions in the stories make the concept of change less abstract and easier to understand. Moreover, the methodology leads to animated and encouraging discussions about gender equality and the roles of individuals and organizations in making change happen.

### Dealing with Challenges

It is not self-evident that meaningful intangible changes resulting from GMLT emerge through the collection, selection and analysis of change stories. MSC has added value, but there are challenges that influence the extent to which the methodology reveals the desired information. The challenges that needed to be dealt in this experiment to make culture change visible with MSC are described next.

Out of the 129 stories that were collected in the first year of the MSC process, 47 reflected cultural change occurring as a result of GMLT.

This was mainly because not every change described in the stories could be attributed to GMLT. This highlighted the importance of setting a clear domain at the start of the process. The domain of GMLT, to which the stories had to relate, was not always understood by story collectors. Some interpreted GMLT as anything related to gender. This led to stories related to change in gender equality that could not be linked to GMLT. These were useful to learn about gender equality, but less so to monitor and evaluate GMLT. Being clearer about what changes can be attributed to GMLT, as well as the importance of collecting stories that reflect these changes, helped in a second round of story collection in Bangladesh to increase the number of change stories attributable to the trajectory.

Participants' skill level also influences the outcome of the MSC process. Skills like active listening and note taking are required to capture change stories characterized by rich descriptions and powerful voices. Analytical skills are required during the selection and secondary analysis of change stories. The success of a selection process can be increased by a capable facilitator who guides the discussion in the right direction.

In experimenting with MSC, story collectors needed to get used to the concept of 'change' as a process. Many of them were used to collecting information about achievements, but not about the change process that led to these achievements. Stories collected in a second round of MSC story collection in Bangladesh already included more information about the change process than had stories collected in the first round. This indicates that the skills needed to collect 'full' stories can be built along the way.

Furthermore, the presence of trust influenced the outcome of the story collection and selection. For example, story collectors explained that they found it difficult to capture the often sensitive stories behind the change process toward greater gender equality.

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'Not everyone feels comfortable sharing the full story. It is not so difficult to tell your achievements, but if you have to describe how you got there, you also have to include the 'before'. This means you might have to say something negative about your family or your husband.' (Story Collector, Bangladesh)

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'The method restores dignity to the story teller and can strengthen the relationship between the story teller and the organization: the person confides their story to someone from the organization which creates a certain intimacy and a sense of recognition on the part of the organization.' (Participant in MSC reflection workshop, Ethiopia)

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The story collection can damage a relationship if the value the story has for the teller is not respected, or if a participant's argumentation in a selection process is not listened to. This became evident after a situation in which the story teller was told by her story collector that her story was 'insignificant'.

The significance attributed in a story by a story teller, and the argumentation of selection committee members, needs to be valued and respected.

If attention is paid to building relationships when collecting stories and enabling a safe environment when discussing them, the process can in turn build trust.

The stories also allow valuable context-specific information to be captured and discussed. However, when change stories were taken out of their regional context, for instance in the secondary analysis, it became difficult for analysts to identify evidence of cultural change. Often, more detailed information about the context in which the stories take place was needed to understand the change. To deal with this challenge, the analysts sought validation of correct interpretation through discussion among themselves.

The fact that change stories are context specific also made it difficult to make generalizations of cultural change among all partner organizations involved in GMLT. If, for example, one woman explains she feels more respected by her colleagues as a result of GMLT, is this then also true for other colleagues? And if her colleagues testify that they experience a similar change, is this then also true for other organizations that participated in GMLT?

The sampling of story tellers and the MSC step of quantification might solve this problem. A more rigorous implementation could have helped to come to a general conclusion about the extent to which GMLT has led to cultural change.

Lastly, available resources can strengthen or hinder the change process. *'The biggest constraint to ensure senior staff was committed to the process was lack of time and financial resources to implement the methodology,'* said a participant of the MSC reflection workshop in Ethiopia. In Bangladesh, the Director of a partner organization stated: *'I am concerned about taking a lot of story tellers' time, and about the time-consuming nature of all the steps'.* A participant from Niger explained that *'the method is very interesting and the sacrifices made to use it have been worth it, but I am still eager to know how to overcome the administrative heaviness and how to overcome unwillingness and lack of resources to use this methodology'.*

To deal with the challenge of resources, a small-scale experiment turned out to be helpful to acquire a realistic idea of what is needed and to assess if new tasks can be merged with the staff's existing tasks and responsibilities. This experiment with MSC in the context of GMLT allowed, for example, a partner organization in Bangladesh to gather the information needed to now integrate the methodology in the monitoring and evaluation system.

Part 4

# Can Most Significant Change methodology be useful in my work?



The experiment with MSC in the context of the Gender Mainstreaming and Leadership Trajectory leads to the conclusion that the methodology has added value to the monitoring and evaluation of the trajectory. It revealed relevant information about MSC's ability to bring out intangible changes that had not become visible with other monitoring tools. Moreover, it inspired motivating conversations about working towards greater gender justice.

Many organizations are struggling to make the results of their interventions visible. MSC might be a valuable addition to their monitoring and evaluation tools.

To help organizations assess whether MSC can also be useful in their work, a small scale experiment with the methodology is an appropriate way to see to what extent it reveals valuable information about changes that otherwise remain hidden. It also helps to assess whether they can create the enabling factors to lead to change and encourage learning.

The following considerations related to the enabling factors and purpose of the methodology, as experienced by Oxfam Novib, might help organizations make a first assessment of the usefulness of MSC in their work.

## Enabling factors

### An open attitude towards MSC as a new methodology

An open attitude towards MSC as a new methodology that is different from standard monitoring and evaluation practices needs to be apparent and nurtured. MSC requires and encourages a new way of working and thinking.

When collecting data, organizations often use mainly quantitative tools which are based on different criteria for scientific validity. In this experiment, this practice led some participants in a selection committee to analyze the significance of the story based on whether they were SMART – specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound. This prevented the selection committee members from analyzing the actual content of the story and explaining why they thought a change was significant or not, thereby missing out on the power of the methodology.

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches have their own value and can complement each other in the monitoring and evaluation of programs. One approach should however not be valued by the standards of the other.

### A safe environment to learn about the methodology

It is useful to keep in mind that, when using MSC for the first time, it will most likely not work perfectly right away. A safe environment is needed to learn about the methodology. Introducing MSC invariably means that staff members get new tasks and are called upon to develop new skills. Using MSC does not require all participants to have monitoring and evaluation expertise. However, it does require solid literacy and basic interviewing skills.

MSC offers a good exercise for program staff at all levels to sharpen and develop many important, transferable skills that may also be useful in other parts of their job. These include designing questions to obtain relevant information, active listening, note taking, writing, translation, dialogue and analytical skills. However, this skills development requires a safe environment where staff is comfortable practicing these skills and gaining necessary confidence.

### **Allocation of sufficient time and money**

A typical response to the introduction of the methodology is that it will consume too much time and money. This is not necessarily true. Partner organizations who participated in this experiment found meaningful and feasible ways to integrate MSC in their ongoing activities. This being said, time and resources needed to successfully incorporate MSC in organizations' current monitoring and evaluation systems should not be underestimated. One must remain realistic, especially with regards to staff time and human resources needed to successfully implement MSC. The following questions can help estimate the appropriate level of resources: How much time does staff need to collect stories? How many people are needed to coordinate the process? Do we have expertise in our partner organizations to provide technical support?

Sufficient staff time allocation will ensure that the process is experienced as an inspiring and motivating exercise, not as an additional burden.

### **The support of a Champion**

The success of the implementation process also depends on the support of a Champion who is willing and able to promote and support the use of MSC. In organizations in which a person with authority encouraged the use of MSC, the process led to valuable insights on cultural change as well as increased learning about this change and greater enthusiasm to continue using the methodology.

## **Purpose of Most Significant Change**

### **Learning**

MSC is an appropriate tool to learn about a given project. It can reveal information about changes that remain hidden by using only quantitative monitoring tools. The change stories, combined with associated selection and analysis processes, enabled participants to come to a better understanding of cultural change and of their own role in the change process.

### **Inclusion and empowerment**

MSC is also an appropriate tool to include different stakeholders in monitoring and evaluation. Through the change stories, voices that are rarely heard are included. The methodology also invites people from different organizations and different positions to discuss what is really important to them. In this way, MSC can contribute to strengthened relationships between, and empowerment of, stakeholders.

### Highlighting unexpected changes

Since MSC is not limited by pre-set indicators, story tellers are able to share unexpected changes. If the question posed by the story collector is sufficiently open, the story teller may describe changes which have arisen in completely unexpected ways through the implementation of an initiative.

In the classification of stories during the secondary analysis, unexpected changes that arose as a result of GMLT were identified. For example, the team discovered that 17 out of 119 stories referred to changes in the area of gender-based violence, of which 9 could be attributed to GMLT. Because fighting gender-based violence was not a specific aim of GMLT, the fact that the trajectory led to changes in levels of gender-based violence was therefore considered a remarkable unexpected change. It led to reconsidering ideas about the way gender mainstreaming programs and stand-alone women's issues, like gender-based violence, are interconnected.

It should also be noted that MSC is said to allow negative changes to be captured. However, Oxfam Novib's experience demonstrates that it is difficult to collect negative changes through MSC. The vast majority of stories collected in this experiment referred to positive changes. However, organizations choosing to study negative changes associated with an intervention may decide to ask specifically for these negative changes to be discussed in story collection. This was not tried in the present experiment.

### Using stories for publication

MSC offers the opportunity to capture appealing stories that are useful for documentation and communication purposes. They are generally short and easy to understand, making them accessible to a wide range of audiences. Stories also have the quality of being viral: when you hear a good story, you are inclined to want to tell it to someone else. However, this can turn the MSC process into a quest for success stories rather than a tool for monitoring and evaluating impact. This could have negative consequences on the quality of the information gathered and ensuing reflection. Once a selection committee starts selecting stories for their appealing quality, they may discard change stories that are less appealing or describe negative changes. These stories could, however, contain valuable insights to learn about project results.

### Discussing change across different cultural context

Using change stories in an international context can generate interesting debates about the way change is perceived and experienced across borders. In this experiment, the discussion about change stories among participants, who came from a range of countries and regions, was engaged and involved. The stories were easily accessible, and enabled learning about gender equality in different contexts.



However, there is also a limitation to the extent in which change stories are useful in an international context. Stories are often told in local languages, recorded in a second language and subsequently translated into another language like English or French to render them accessible to other stakeholders. Ensuring that meaning, tone and the voice of the story teller are accurately and intelligibly captured through translation can pose a challenge to organizations using MSC in multilingual, international settings.

The story teller can also normally assume that the story collector possesses a basic understanding of the local context. Once the story travels to a different country for selection and analysis, however, the reader may not possess the knowledge of local context needed to understand exactly why the change is significant to the story teller and to the local organization that collected it. Since meaning is deeply embedded in context, the significance of a story does not always travel well with the story itself.

## Can Most Significant Change be useful in my work?

“Can you foster important enabling factors?”

- An open attitude to a new additional approach for monitoring and evaluation
- A safe environment to learn about the methodology, and opportunities for capacity building
- Specific allocation of staff time and financial resources to the process
- The support of a Champion to inspire and motivate those involved to keep the process on track

What are you looking to gain by using the methodology?

MSC might be an appropriate tool if you want to:

- Inspire learning about the progress towards reaching development objectives
- Collect evidence of intangible changes, like behavioural and attitudinal changes
- Collect negative or unexpected changes
- Strengthen the empowering effect and inclusionary practices of your monitoring and evaluation

Pay special attention if you want to:

- Use change stories for publication purposes
- Use the methodology in an international context

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