Doing Away With Predetermined Indicators: Monitoring using the Most Significant Changes Approach[1]

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The Review-Team was seated under a tree in a Tanzanian village on the few comfortable chairs available. In front of us, were a small group of male and female farmers engaged in onion growing. My organisation supported this group to raise its income. The Review-Team began its work:
- How is it going?
- Thank you, we are very happy.
- What about your activity, and the onions? Do you get more income?
- Well, yes, maybe. We cultivate more land, but prices are going down and transport is going up. But it works out well. We are happy with the support.
- If you were to *prove* to us that it works, what would you tell us?
- (Answer from a young woman) We do not need to tell you anything. You can just use your eyes! Or you can use your ears! We do not have to tell you.
- Eyes and ears? What do you mean?
- (Young woman) *Yes*, I am sitting here among the men, and I *speak*. This never happened before, and it is all because of your support.

The Most Significant Changes Approach

This chapter documents MS's experiences of introducing a promising and above all sensible monitoring system that is especially suited for grasping social processes within the field of development co-operation. The approach elicits rich and varied information and it is well suited for uncovering the unforeseen consequences of development interventions.

Its "inventor," Dr. Rick Davies, pioneered the Most Significant Changes methodology (MSC) in Bangladesh in 1994[3]. Since then, a number of consultants and organisations have tried out the method to varying degrees. One can find reports depicting its use in Australia, Afghanistan, Fiji, Vanuatu, Samoa, the Philippines, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia. The British Volunteer Service Overseas is now adopting it as an important element of its official impact monitoring system for their volunteer programme.

MS is a Danish NGO working with a partnership-based programme in Africa, Asia, and Central America. Like many other organisations, MS and its partners have been trying for years to put various traditional monitoring systems in place. As is quite typical, our approach to monitoring had two main aims. It should *document* our activities and their effects on the lives of people: without documentation, downward and upward accountability is impossible. And it should facilitate *Organisational Learning* where we and our partners can learn from experience and adjust to new and unexpected situations. After several years of effort, we realised that the traditional systems did not serve either of the two purposes very well. Since 2001, we have therefore been trying out the radically different MSC methodology.

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[1] This chapter is a partly altered, updated version of a previously published article, P. Sigsgaard, 'Monitoring without indicators: an ongoing testing of the MSC approach', *Evaluation Journal of Australasia, New series*, Vol. 2, No. 1, August 2002.

[2] The organization is known in English as the Danish Association for International Cooperation. See www.ms.dk

[3] Davies, R. ' An evolutionary approach to facilitating organisational learning: An experiment by the Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh.' http://www.swan.ac.uk/cds/rd/ccdb.htm

Rick Davies has been extremely helpful in giving advice and has greatly inspired our current attempt to put the methodology into practice. Likewise, we have drawn on the experiences by Jessica Dart, who has used the approach extensively in Australia. I also owe thanks to Jo Rowlands (VSO - U.K.) and Ros David (Action Aid U.K.) for their willingness to share their experiences with me before we embarked on our own experiment.

With MSC, you simply ask people to identify positive or negative changes observed over a period of time within a given *domain* of interest. The same people are asked about which change they find the most important, and why they have chosen it as *the most significant*. We are *not* asking about changes that have occurred in the individual informant's life. We are interested in his or her perception of "objective", verifiable changes that have occurred in other people's lives.

The outcome of the exercise will be a number of recorded "stories" about change. Some of them, but not all, relate to our objectives and it is probable that our activities contributed to the change. Part of our need to document activities and their effects is thereby met.

We also learn about intended or unintended effects of the activities through this process. We will have to face the fact that some well-meant interventions are not seen to have changed anything. We can grasp realities as people see them by systematic, collective reflection on the "stories" told. This reflection attaches social meaning to the outcome of our activities and our objectives. Organisational learning takes place.

A prerequisite for facilitating new insight and learning is that results of the exercise are broadly disseminated and discussed within the organisation. Thus feedback mechanisms are important. With MSC, this is achieved through assessments of the data by influential groups at different levels in the organisation. Their choices and attached motivations of "the ultra-most significant" are communicated to all actors in the system.

In MS, these influential groups are board members at different levels. A given country programme has a Policy Advisory Board (PAB) where partners and independent nationals are in the majority. In Denmark, a board representing the members governs MS. The assessments of stories in the MS hierarchy is important, but very little organisational learning will occur if the results are not communicated back to the people that provided the information in the first place. One learns about MS's political priorities by hearing about which changes "the system" finds important.[4]

To improve understanding, it is also mandatory that some of the more dramatic or surprising "stories" be *verified* by supplementary investigation. Through this, the subjective perceptions of informants can be detailed and the (social) processes leading to a given change can be mapped out.

The method uses open-ended questions, and asks for stories rather than condensed quantitative measures. Therefore, it often grasps the unforeseen consequences of what the development organisations have set in motion. In the example at the beginning of this article, the Review Team is clearly looking for outcomes satisfying their indicator (money), mirroring the objective of income generation. The team came to appreciate that this objective was not so important to the production group, but that gender equity had become a key focus and had been facilitated by the development intervention[5].

Why this breakaway from orthodoxy?

The principal reason for trying out an alternative monitoring system was the painful realisation that the modified logical framework system being used simply did not work. One reason for the failure was connected with resources. Even though the system was simplified, it demanded too much work from people who already had too much to do with the day-to-day implementation of the programmes. Data were not systematically recorded and very little analysis was actually done on the reports and information that were actually forwarded.

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[4] The Australian article (see note 1) provides a step-by-step guide for MS's field offices on how MS implements the MSC approach, including the assessments by the different programme committees.
[5] The "donor" organisation (MS) had actually used gender training as an entry point to partnership with groups in the area. The case also illustrates why it is not totally correct to label MSC an "Indicator-free Monitoring System." It would be more appropriate to talk about a method without pre-defined indicators, which allows people to invent them themselves.

This may also have led to a vicious circle, where partners and MS field officers were not very interested in collecting all this information – sensing correctly that it might soon end up gathering dust on a shelf somewhere.[6]

Another problem resulted from the degree of difficulty of the task itself. Partners and all other people at all levels of MS demonstrated clearly that they had problems defining objectives in an operational manner. It was even more pathetic to witness how all of us - including our hired consultants - tried to construct ambitious, non-measurable, quantitatively formulated indicators that were never used.

This paucity of usable documentation and knowledge gained stood clearly out against a background of everybody being occasionally extremely busy with collection of all kinds of fragmented data. We also realised that we were sharing this misery with nearly all other organisations, including the big, official donor agencies. Everybody seemed to invest a lot in following the ritual, very few could present gains from it.

MS was attracted to test MSC because the organisation expected to save considerable time and energy by using the approach. The orthodox system had forced us to invent and agree on sophisticated, pre-constructed, quantitative indicators, after which we continually struggled to feed these indicators into a system, which clearly lacked capacity for measuring against them.

But there are other reasons why MS felt this new approach was appropriate. It is inclusive and participatory at all levels. It does not alienate the actors and is well in line with the ideas and values guiding MS' partnership approach. Some of our central values include encouraging Partners (PAB) to influence priorities and decision-making and to engage in critical dialogue and influence the MS agenda. We try to follow through on our aim to establish an equitable relationship between those placed low and high in the hierarchy. Accountability and full openness (transparency) are other central demands for serious partnership characterised by confidence and reciprocity.

The MSC approach complements MS's work in several ways. Firstly it is truly transparent and free from pseudo-objectivity. It demystifies monitoring and makes it understandable to all of us. The method reflects a strong epic tradition that marks many non-western cultures and is suited for the use of information that is already available, that has come up in Partnership Review Workshops.[7] It demands that information is used at all levels with clear links between monitoring at partner or "beneficiary" level, monitoring of country programmes, and the whole, global MS programme. Thus the coherence of the MS partnership system is supported. Reciprocity is central.

Finally, MSC serves as a worthwhile supplement to the so-called M&E system already in place[8]. This system monitors the partnerships and jointly agreed activities by combining regular, supportive visits by MS's programme officers with a multitude of written progress reports from partners and Danish Development workers. Two to five day Annual Review workshops with all partners add to the routine. The system looks very coherent and well thought out regarding formats and time sequencing, but has its limitations when put into practice in the real world.

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[6] In her engaging Ph.D. dissertation, Dr. Esther Mebrahtu has documented the same processes for some international NGOs working in Ethiopia. The big importance attached to M&E at HQ level was not met with the same enthusiasm at field office and field officers' level. Some organisations having invented elaborate M&E systems realised that they were not used. Esther Mebrathu: Participation, Monitoring and Evaluation: Perceptions and Experiences of INGOs in Ethiopia, Forthcoming, INTRAC: 2004.
[7] According to the existing Monitoring system in MS, Partnership Review Workshops are held annually with each partner. Here, stakeholders discuss the results gained so far and plan for the coming year in light of experiences gained. The review workshop is one of a few institutions in the M&E system that is producing valuable documentation and insight learning, especially for the partner-organisation.
[8] The Most Significant Changes method is a tool for continuous monitoring. It is not suited for evaluations, which normally refer closely to original objectives and are conducted after activities have been ended. On the other hand, data collected and insight gained through MSC can feed well into an evaluation. Monitoring and Evaluation are not two completely distinct processes, see the article by Marc de Boer in Evaluation Journal of Australasia, Vol. 1, No.2, December 2001

Pilot Studies

The MS programmes in Zambia and Mozambique were chosen as testing grounds for MSC, principally because they provided different cultural, historical and linguistic settings and differed in the way the partnership approach had been implemented. Ten partner organisations in each country were visited. During the pilot, we tested a number of different interviewing methods and continually elaborated and refined the wording of questions and the explanations given for the "domains of interest." The latter, especially, was a heavy task. The method demands much time to be invested in precise formulations, and that the interviewer is also familiar with the concepts involved.

In Zambia, "interviews" were often conducted in relatively large groups (15-40 people). The results of the group interviews were promising and the method often led to dramatic new knowledge and insight. [9] In Mozambique, we used an approach closer to the system that is currently being used in further trials: one or two informants are chosen by the partner-representative, who also conducts the interview.

There were a number of fears within MS that the methodology would not elicit appropriate information, or would skew the responses made by informants. For example, very open questions might be too broad to elicit specific information about partnership activities and their outcomes. However, it turned out that these provided us with rich information on political and societal *context*. Luckily for MS, the majority of the changes observed related to some of the supported activities, but were very often seen in wider perspective than that of the input-activity-outcome project picture.

In the partner organisations, there was an understandable tendency to talk automatically about changes closely related to the organisations' interventions and aims. We therefore stated clearly at the beginning of interviews that we were interested in the changes in the lives of people in the community. We further explained that we would ask questions about the organisation's performance at the end of the interview. Even so, the method does *not*, as many had feared, encourage informants to talk only about positive changes and to present a 'rosy' picture. We asked about 'changes for better or worse' and that was sufficient to get a more varied response. It was extremely easy for the PAB members to choose the stories later that they found significant from a country programme angle.

The overall result was that the method worked. It provided us with added insight, especially about the importance connected to the observed changes. It also sometimes pointed to new issues not previously considered. Very little of the information related to us could be found in reports and files already available at the MS offices. We found that, after posing the same question over a few days to different people at different places, we became able to predict future answers with a high degree of accuracy. This is an indication that the method is reliable and that the answers objectively reflect widespread perceptions about conditions in the given social setting. We believe that others could have replicated the exercise at the time and that they would have discovered something quite similar.

Participants benefited from the use of the methodology, especially from the group sessions. "We have never talked about our work like that," a director of a small NGO exclaimed after a staff session. Many partners expressed surprise about how easily the methodology led to important discussions and reflection among staff about their role and the wider setting they were operating in. Many organisations decided to continue using the approach as an internal monitoring tool. Group sessions were also used as an opportunity for the 'beneficiaries' to speak out. While participants

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[9] We received valuable help from MS Programme Officers. I am very grateful for the dedicated assistance rendered by Charlton Sulwe, MS Zambia, and Roberto Armando, MS Mozambique

were asked to speak only for five minutes about the significant changes they had seen as a result of their cooperation with partners, several spoke for much longer, and tended to give a little history as well as recounting significant changes. The presentations caused much interest and discussion amongst workshop participants and when they came to discuss what alterations could be made to the following year's planning, beneficiaries' perception of significant changes seemed to act as a good guide. Furthermore, after one particular meeting several high level partner staff members commented on how well the beneficiaries spoke and how much they knew about what the organisation was really doing in comparison to their own understanding.

The pilot study threw up a number of interesting findings about how informants reacted to the methodology. For example, field workers (extension officers) from partner organisations proved to be excellent informants. So called 'beneficiaries' directly involved in the activities also gave very relevant answers. However, officials working at office level and in higher level positions tended to give more unspecific and vague answers. Also, at the start respondents often gave their replies in a very flowery, formal and circumvent way. This was especially marked in Mozambique, which may be due to the Portuguese language itself. It may also result from a tradition of speaking very formally when reporting to officials and the like. Whilst all respondents easily identified changes, they rarely communicated them as stories. Adhering to the methodology, we asked for stories rather than short, generalised statements. Our expectations may have been coloured by a slightly stereotyped perception of African people as especially adept in storytelling (the epic culture). It may well be that objective-oriented planning and what I call logframe-terrorism have influenced many of our respondents. In one small Community Based Organisation, I witnessed staff taking part in a lively group discussion conducted in their own language. The discussion was, however, spiced with words like 'output' and 'indicator'. When I reminded them that the group should just agree on a story about the most significant change, they responded, "We first want to identify outcome based on our input – then afterwards we will invent a story for you".

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There were a number of difficulties with the methodology, however. It is not always easy for a respondent to explain immediately why (s)he has chosen a given change as the most significant. Often the answer was "… because I find it most important", or "this is what came into my mind as significant." In this case, probing may be needed. Also, Some 'domains' are more easily grasped than others. When using the method, the interviewer is often compelled to explain the exercise using locally understood concepts rather than the exact wording in the questionnaire. It was, for example, difficult to explain the domain of 'Intercultural Co-operation'. In Mozambique, it often did not ring any bells. This was a bit surprising since MS runs a personnel programme posting Danes with the partner organisation. One declared aim is to stimulate co-operation across cultural borders. However, the Danes were rarely perceived as agents of intercultural dialogue, but seen more as professional assistants[10]. It follows from this that the method benefits from facilitation by an interviewer. Written answers to mailed questionnaires will not produce the right type of responses. Other difficulties with the methodology are outlined in the following section.

Finally, verification of stories was not undertaken in the pilot study. However, many of the stories had a character that immediately asked for further investigation.[11] The curiosity of MS' programme

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[10] MS Mozambique name the Danes "Tecnicos Cooperantes" today. This further stresses the professional aspects. Ironically, when the programme started in 1982, they were labelled "Internationalistas" or "Solidarity Workers" – thereby stressing the function of linking Mozambique to other parts of the world

[11] An example: a small NGO in Zambia claimed to have reduced malnutrition among small children in their area by more than 10%. This is dramatic as malnutrition is rising at the national level. A sad outcome of a possible verification may be that the conclusion is based on bad statistics. The organisation had its numbers from under-five-clinics. A guess is that

officers was awakened, and we expected that a follow up would be done. As can be seen below, this expectation was a bit optimistic. We also found that the word verification should not be used externally for these further investigations. The concept is too much connected with "control."

Adapting the Methodology

The pilot exercise was promising and MS decided to continue experimentation on a larger scale. We made detailed guidelines for a uniform use of the approach for seven country field offices in Africa (see note 4). We hoped to know by the end of 2002 whether a simple version of the method would work. It did not work out as expected. The process has been delayed, not least because even the simple version was difficult to handle for some offices. I suspect that the method is basically so simple and unlike the traditional approaches, that our staff find it highly suspect. Internal scepticism has been one difficulty to overcome, and we have not yet conquered this. Some concrete demonstration of the values attached to the approach and further encouragement are still needed.

However, MS is still – more slowly – working on introducing and adapting the method. We are still convinced that it will be institutionalised in the future programme. Below are some of the experiences and lessons learned so far:

We now ask informants to identify changes directly and provide us with examples illustrating these changes. The search for a 'story' is not in focus anymore. We also urge the informant to summarise and condense the 'story'. If they give too long a narrative, we pose a question that has very little relation to the nostalgic/romantic idea of African people and their supposed epic culture. For example: "If you were to talk about this significant change to a reporter from CNN and want it to make the headline of the day, what would you say?" The question elicits surprisingly sharp, precise answers about what the change is all about.

Group interviews were interesting and often set off a long and detailed discussion among people in the organisations or in the community. However, working with big groups is costly and demands a skilful facilitator. Therefore, it cannot be run by the partners themselves or on a large scale as a standard MS system. However, group interviews identifying most significant changes fit well into the annual Partnership Review Workshops that are standard in most country programmes. These workshops are already organised around group work and external facilitation. One way of organising this is to divide a big group into smaller units of two to three people. The small groups are asked to identify a change that the members agree is the most significant. Later the groups talk about their results in plenary, and the big group tries to agree on one or two changes that all the members find the most important. They then state their reasons for this assessment. It is possible to conduct such a process in less than three hours. The big advantage in using this approach during the annual Partnership Review Workshops is that it elicits opinions and observations from people who are rarely heard, even in these workshops. I am here hinting at the people that the partners work with and for: 'the Clients'.

As already mentioned, we are interested in changes within a number of specified *domains*. We invested much time in delineating and explaining these domains to the informants. In spite of this, we did not always manage to convey what our focus on Intercultural Co-operation was all about. Other organisations and researchers using the method have experienced the same difficulty in getting *their* conceptualisation of reality across. A common reaction is to skip any mention of domains when posing the question. Thus the questions will be very open-ended. When a change has been identified, it is then up to the researcher to place the answer within a domain of interest.

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mothers having malnourished children are not using the clinics as much as before (User fee? Afraid of being stigmatised?).

I believe that we should continue to explain our areas of interest to the informant. An important learning dimension of the method will be lost if we refrain from doing so. Paradoxically, our difficulty in explaining to our partners what Intercultural Co-operation is, brought out the power of the MSC approach as an organisational learning tool. MS got a good opportunity to raise awareness of its fundamental aim by asking and elaborating on questions about Intercultural Co-operation. We expect that over time, the method will help shape the partners' perception of this dimension of the development work. We have therefore decided to retain the questions even though they are difficult to grasp at present. A sceptical MS staff member or board member will say that influencing the perception of a respondent amounts to asking a leading question. This is true: we wish to *influence our "object" through the measurement process.* Influencing each other is what mutual learning is all about.

Related to the discussion about domains, is the way we try to grasp the wider context within which we and our partners work. For many, the most difficult aspect of the method is that questions are detached from the specific development activities that are agreed between MS and the Partner. We intentionally ask about changes within a domain, but not about changes brought about by our interventions. A Zambian partner angrily asked: "What good is this information gathered on the changes when they do not reflect our efforts?" There were also examples of field and programme officers, who changed the wording in the questionnaires so that informants were asked about changes related to very concrete interventions. Our overall experience is, however, that even if one asks general questions about change, a number of the changes identified can be attributed to some MS/Partner endeavours. If this is not the case – then the monitoring shows that we have a problem. The task that remains is to explain to staff and partners involved that it is of course legitimate to ask questions directly relating to interventions, (some organisations do use the MSC method in this way[12]). However, one risks overlooking the fact that changes identified may be insignificant in the context of the wider societal picture, and their social context may be missed. Therefore, MS may want to stick to the broader approach.

Some methodological problems arose. For example, who should pose the questions? Some partners grasped the idea relatively easily and could identify people with skills to manage the system and the interviewing. However, in many cases MS Field or Programme Officers felt that they had to conduct the process – at least in the beginning. This places an additional workload on the programme officer and it may work against adoption of the system. However, the questions that we feel should be posed, are those that one would expect a programme officer to explore when visiting a partner. In that sense, we are not talking about something "extra". For partners as well as for programme officers, it has proven necessary to "train" the interviewers in mini-courses (½ to one day) in how to apply the method, non-directive interview techniques, and probing.

There was also the problem of analysis: The idea is that all "stories" collected are made accessible for all in a simple database, and that several analytical exercises are undertaken with the material. These analyses have still not been carried out. The "stories" reported are still too few in number and they have been produced under very different methodological circumstances. This is one barrier. Another relates to time and capabilities within MS. Too few people can do this analysis, and they are too busy with other tasks. Thirdly, it has been extremely difficult to get the MS country field offices to use an 'Access' database constructed for storing MSC stories. The very simple database proved to be too complicated. This means that the data are still not accessible for everybody – which includes the partners and those who produced the information. This fundamental weakness has to be addressed if we want to maintain that the MSC approach provides the system with food for thought and insightful learning.

Related to this problem was the fact that the outcomes of the exercise were only fed back to the partners to a limited extent. It was simply forgotten in some cases. When institutionalising the

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[12] The organisation SOS Sahel in Ethiopia is said to do this according to the above mentioned Ph.D. dissertation, note 6.

system, it must be stressed that the feedback mechanism is equally important as the collection of data and upwards reporting.[13]

Some feared that the MSC methodology would demand a lot of additional investment in terms of time and manpower. This has not been a major problem. The interviews and reporting in the field can be conducted in one or two hours. Sorting and discussing the "stories" at country programme level can be done in two to three hours . The partners should not experience forwarding the data as an additional burden. The guidelines presuppose that the MSC-data are forwarded as a substitute for one of four narrative progress-reports that the partner works out during the year. However, some partners have felt it to be an additional task – they were not used to writing the narrative report as envisioned in the agreements with MS!

We had hoped that curiosity would lead staff to verify some statements of changes through further investigation. This was too optimistic. We have seen very few attempts to go beyond the immediate stories.– This is probably because programme staff are too busy and in some instances may also need additional skills in order to conduct the investigations. In the future, it will be necessary to push for such verification to be done. It is an element that will bring objectivity to informants' responses and it contributes greatly to learning from the monitoring process. I believe that it will be necessary to demand a certain minimum number of cases per batch of stories to be selected for further exploration.

Preliminary Conclusions

It is my guess that the method will be adopted, and used as a monitoring system by MS. There are also indications that the work with this simple approach has demystified monitoring in general. The process of verification and the curiosity aroused by the powerful data collected, will urge the country offices as well as the partners, to supplement their knowledge through use of other, maybe more refined and controlled measures.

We also already now see a change in thinking about monitoring in several of our programmes. One country programme is at present struggling with a database suited for gathering data and analysing it in a simple monitoring process. Nearly all our staff now talk about *change* in the same sentence as they use the word *monitoring*. In some country-programmes, we witness a new and special effort to collect baseline data. In reports, we read more and more examples of change as told by people themselves – and we see the same tendency spreading out to the partners. We are, however, still tending to produce anecdotal evidence as opposed to more analytical evidence pointing towards probable effects of the partnership activities.

The MSC system is only partially participatory. Domains of interest are centrally decided on, and the sorting of stories according to significance is hierarchic. However, I believe that the use of and respect for peoples' own indicators will lead to participatory methodologies and "measurement" based on *negotiated indicators* where all stakeholders have a say in the very planning of the development process.[14]

Some people in the MS system have voiced a concern that the MSC method is too simple and "loose" to be accepted by our back donor, Danida, and our staff in the field. The method is not scientific enough, they say. My computer's thesaurus programme tells me that science means knowledge. I can confidently recommend the Most Significant Changes methodology as scientific.

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[13] Jon Kurtz takes up the issue of MSC as contributing to organisational learning in a M.Sc. thesis based on data from a CARE programme in Afghanistan. He rightly points out that the MSC in itself does not automatically provide a platform for shared learning or reflection on experiences. Even if the "downward dialogue" is taken care of, this dialogue is not necessarily providing learning, as field staff is not always given an active role.
Kurtz, Jon: "Innovating for Organizational, Learning with the Most Significant Change Method", Chapter 5 in draft thesis titled Learning Amidst Crisis, 2003.
[14] See Estrella, M. et. al.(eds.): Learning From Change, London 2000