**Good Practice Note:**

**Story of Significant Change (SSC)**

# 1 Introduction

The Story of Significant Change (SSC)[1] methodology was developed to narrate, assess and validate instances of change for the Australia Timor-Leste Bilateral Development Assistance Program. The method was developed specifically for use in the Timor-Leste Performance Assessment Framework (PAF). M&E House provides training and support to DFAT's implementing partners in using the SSC methodology. This guide provides a step-by-step guide for the SSC process.

# 2 Steps to develop a Story of Significant Change

There are five key steps to be followed in the SSC process, as described below.

Identify   Harvest   Narrate   Verify   Report

1.  **Identify:** For each PAF indicator, Implementing Partners (IPs) should specifically identify the instances of change that they considered they have achieved during the reporting period. At this stage, IPs also need to identify methods (e.g. key informant interviews, focus group discussions), decide who to interview, and identify other data sources and relevant documents such as reports and minutes of meetings.

2.  **Harvest:** In this step, IPs gather data from multiple sources to develop a story narrative. Data will mainly be collected from interviews with a range of stakeholders (individuals or groups). The stakeholders interviewed should be from both within and outside the program team, and where possible should include the people the change targeted or involved. Information or data can also be collected from other sources such as reports, meeting minutes, publications and secondary quantitative data from within and outside the program.

3.  **Narrate:** In this step, IPs collate the results from various data sources (from Step 2 Harvest). The analysis of evidence is translated into findings to develop a narrative. IPs use the analysis of evidence and findings to write the SSC (see Annex 1 for the SSC template). The SSC should describe the context around the change, the issue the program was trying to address, what the program did to address the issue, and what change occurred. The SSC should directly reflect the PAF indicator, and consider the significance of the change according to the PAF indicator rubric.

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[1] This is based on the Significant Instance of Policy and Systems Improvement (SIPSI) technique used by DFAT in Timor-Leste and Indonesia. The tool was changed to SSC so it can be used to measure significant change for policies and other events or instances of change.

4.  **Verify:** In this step SSCs are verified by an independent panel, who rate the SSC in terms of the strength of evidence, significance of the change, and the program's contribution to the change. Based on these criteria, the panel rates SSCs as highly significant, significant, or not significant. (See Annex 2 for the verification assessment form).

5.  **Report:** IPs upload the final SSC, and the verification panel's report, via the Management Information System (MIS). SSCs rated as highly significant or significant may be included in the Aid Program Performance Report (APPR) and/or in the PAF Results Report.

# 3   Which PAF indicators are reported using SSCs?

SSCs are being used by IPs to report against PAF qualitative indicators. In 2018, there are 11 PAF qualitative indicators (Table 1). The PAF Technical Notes (Release 2, August 2018) provide a guide to IPs on how to collate data for the PAF. The Technical Notes cover the definition, scope and data collection details for each indicator. For PAF qualitative indicators, the Technical Notes also include rubrics for assessing the significance of the change as highly significant, significant or not significant. The rubric is specific for each indicator.

**Table 1: PAF qualitative indicators, 2018**

| INDICATOR NUMBER | INDICATOR |
| --- | --- |
| Indicator 2 | Instances of strengthened local business |
| Indicator 3 | Instances of improved business environment |
| Indicator 7 | Instances of workforce ready people contributing to development |
| Indicator 8 | Instances of improved systems for service delivery |
| Indicator 11 | Instances of behaviour change |
| Indicator 14 | Instances of women's leadership opportunities and empowerment |
| Indicator 16 | Instances of inclusive policy development |
| Indicator 18 | Instances of community demand for better governance |
| Indicator 19 | Instances of improved sub-national governance |
| Indicator 20 | Instances of improved policy and implementation |
| Indicator 21 | Instances of evidence available for decision-making |

## 4 Principles of a good SSC narrative

The following are key principles for developing a good quality SSC narrative.

**Change has occurred.** Instances of change should be reported when the outcome is achieved, not when the activities are done. We are looking for significant improvements in areas that contribute to the PAF outcomes, e.g. business environment, women's empowerment, policy, and systems for service delivery. The definition of significance has been defined in a rubric for each PAF qualitative indicator (see PAF Technical Notes), and will assist in identifying instances of change that occurred during the reporting period (six-monthly).

**Strong evidence.** Ensure that data are being collected to support the SSC. It is important to have sound methods leading to trustworthy results. Strong evidence is derived from multiple reliable sources, has been collected with reliable methods and analysed to generate results.

**Lean and efficient.** During the SSC 'Identify' and 'Harvest' steps, it is important to collect "need-to-know" not "nice-to-know" information, and to make efficient use of time and resources when collecting, analysing, narrating and reporting. At the minimum, the interview guide should focus on the change that occurred, the contribution of the program to change and the role of the key informant in the instance of change.

**Link between narrative and evidence.** The SSC should 'weave' together evidence from multiple sources to tell a compelling story of change. There should be a clear and logical link between the narrative and the evidence. Quotes, and footnotes indicating the sources of information, are highly valuable.

**Succinct and readable.** The narrative should be succinct, well written and use simple English. The SSC template includes guiding questions under each section. SSCs are read by a wide audience without prior knowledge of your program or the project/activity that led to the change. Directly address the guiding questions in the SSC template, to help communicate 'the problem being addressed'; 'what your program did to address the problem'; and 'the change that occurred'.

## 5 Verification process

All SSCs should be verified by an independent panel. For the PAF verification process, the panel comprises three to four representatives from DFAT, M&E House and other IPs. The panel assesses each SSC against the following domains: the strength of evidence, the program's contribution to change, and the significance of change. Each panel member will follow the below process when assessing an SSC:

- Rate each of the three domains as high, moderate or low using the rubrics in the Verification Assessment Form. The rubrics for **Strength of evidence** and **Contribution of the program to change** are the same for all 11 PAF qualitative indicators. The rubric for **Significance of change** is different for each indicator. Each PAF indicator has a specific Verification Assessment Form; see Annex 2 for an example, and the PAF Technical Notes (Release 2, August 2018) for verification assessment forms for all 11 indicators.
- Determine the overall rating as highly significant, significant or not significant.
- Note comments or questions within the Verification Assessment Form. Additional information can be sought from program staff during the verification meeting.
- Send copies of completed Verification Assessment Forms to M&E House one day before the verification meeting.
- Ratings can be changed during the verification meeting, but not after the verification panel meeting.

Verification panel meetings are organised and chaired by M&E House. The roles and responsibilities of participants in the verification panel are summarised in Table 2 below. During the meeting, the panel will discuss their views relating to the domains. The panel will arrive at an agreed rating for each domain, and an agreed overall rating of the SSC narrative as highly significant, significant or not significant.

The verification process increases the rigour of the SSC, and provides an opportunity for cross-program information exchange and possible collaboration. The verification assessment is not a performance assessment of the program or activity.

**Table 2: Responsibilities of verification panel participants**

| WHO | RESPONSIBILITIES |
|---|---|
| **M&E House** | Plan and organise all verification panel meetings, collect all SSCs from IPs |
| | Prepare all materials, provide relevant materials including copies of SSCs to verification panel members at least one week before the meeting |
| | Conduct information session for panel members |
| | Collect completed verification forms from panel members at least one day before the meeting |
| | Consolidate panel members' ratings and prepare all verification panel reports |
| **Verification panel chair** | Moderate panel discussion |
| | Monitor timing of verification meeting |
| | Ensure that the panel has agreed on assessment ratings (by domain and an overall rating) |
| **Verification panel members** | Attend information session and ensure having all necessary information/materials before the verification panel meeting |
| | Review designated SSCs before the panel meeting and complete a verification form per SSC |
| | Send copy of completed verification forms to M&E House one day before the verification panel meeting |
| | Attend the verification panel meeting, provide succinct summary of assessment when prompted by the panel chair, and seek clarification from IP representative as necessary |
| | Be respectful of opinions of other panel members and IP representative |
| **Implementing Partners** | Provide SSCs within agreed timeframe |
| | Prepare for the panel to ask clarification questions and provide representative(s) during the designated panel verification meeting |
| | Provide additional information or respond to queries as requested by panel members during the verification meeting |
| | Be respectful of opinions of verification panel members |

## 6  Guide to a successful verification process

Some items to note during verification panel meetings:

- One week before the SSC verification meeting, M&E House will hold an information session for panel members, and provide panel members with all relevant documents (e.g. SSCs, verification forms, timetable, SSC Guide)
- Assessment ratings should be high, moderate or low; not 'moderate to high' or 'low to moderate'.
- There are no right or wrong answers – we respect each other's opinions.
- The process is not an assessment of the program or activity's performance. The panel should use the relevant rubric to make an assessment of the domain (strength of evidence, significance of change and program's contribution to the change).
- Panel members' ratings are final at the end of the verification panel meeting. Panel members can change their assessment scores during the verification panel meeting, but no further changes to ratings will be accepted outside of the verification panel meeting.
- Program representatives presenting the narratives should avoid influencing panel members' assessments or ratings. Note that the process is subjective and based on opinion of individual panel members, relating only to the 3-page narrative and not on any other external information not available during the verification meeting.
- IPs can update their SSC. However, no further verification panel assessment will be undertaken on any revised SSC after the panel meeting.
- The verification panel report will not reflect the detailed discussion of the panel meeting. The report will record the panel ratings including a brief summary of the panel's justification for the agreed final assessment rating.
- Consider the balance between rigour and efficiency. In general, two or three sources of evidence is sufficient – evidence from three of more sources is considered 'strong evidence'. During the verification panel meeting, the panel should not ask programs to update the SSC by collecting and analysing additional sources of evidence.
- IPs are encouraged to observe other programs' SSC verification panel meetings, not only their own. This is an opportunity to learn about other programs' stories of change, and identify opportunities for cross-program exchange and collaboration.

## 7  Verification panel report

For each SSC assessed, M&E House will prepare a verification panel report (Annex 3). A week after the verification panel meetings, M&E House will send out relevant SSC verification panel report to IPs. The verification panel report will not provide detailed panel discussions but will only summarise reasons or justifications for panel scores. The verification panel report may also include any key recommendations or suggestions for improvements from panel members.

*This Good Practice Note has been prepared by M&E House for the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). M&E House is implemented by GHD Pty Ltd., in association with Clear Horizon Pty Ltd.*

# Annex 1: SSC Narrative Template

**(Maximum length - three pages)**

| Section | Details |
|---|---|
| **PAF Indicator** | *Enter here the relevant PAF indicator number and title which this story represents.* |
| **Program Name** | |
| **Title of Story** | *Please choose a short title to capture this story idea (less than 10 words)* |
| **Summary** | *Summarise your story in 200 words, using these sub-headings:* <br> *(**Note:** These summaries will be published in the annual PAF data report)* <br> (a) What was the problem being addressed? <br> (b) What did the program do to address the problem? <br> *(c) What change occurred?* |
| **Key Quote** | *Provide one quote from a participant interview that best represents the instance of change.* |
| **1 METHOD** | |
| **What was the method and data source you used?** | *How did you collect evidence for this story? Include a list of people or groups interviewed for this story (not names, just their role/organisation), and who conducted the interview. Also list any other sources of evidence (e.g. evaluation reports, monitoring data, government data, etc.) you used.* |
| **2 STORY OF CHANGE** | |
| **What is the background information of the story?** | *Describe relevant background and context information to your story.* |
| **What was the issue the program tried to address?** | *Describe the (baseline) situation, and the issue or problem which the program tried to address.* |
| **What did the program do to address the issue?** | *Describe the activities and approaches the program did to address the issue and achieve the change.* |
| **What change occurred?** | *Describe the change. What changed? When did the change occur? Who benefited from the change? How did the change benefit people who are socially excluded or vulnerable? What was the situation after the change?* <br> ***Note:*** *When telling the story, try to say where the evidence comes from, e.g. "Focus group participants said …" or "A female farmer stated …".* |
| **What else contributed?** | *Describe here other factors such as other stakeholders that contributed to the change.* |
| **3 REFLECTION** | |

*For the criteria below, self-assess your story across the verification criteria. Circle the ranking and describe why. See the PAF Technical Notes for the indicator for more information.*

| Criterion | | | | Description |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Strength of evidence** | High | Moderate | Low | *Describe why you consider your strength of evidence to be this level. Refer to the strength of evidence rubric in the PAF Technical Notes.* |
| **Significance of change** | High | Moderate | Low | *Describe why you consider your story to be this level of significance. Refer to the significance rubric for this indicator in the PAF Technical Notes.* |
| **Level of contribution of the Program to the change** | High | Moderate | Low | *Describe why you consider your program's contribution to be this level. Refer to the contribution rubric in the PAF Technical Notes.* |
| **OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE** | High | Moderate | Low | *Describe why you consider your story to be this level of significance.* |
| **LEARNING** | | | | *Describe what you learned, and what you may do differently in the future as a result.* |

## Annex 2: Verification assessment form

Below is an example of a verification assessment form, used by verification panel members to rate the significance of the SSC narrative. The panel will assess the strength of evidence, the program's contribution to change, and the significance of change. The panel will use the rubric to guide their assessment. The rubrics for **Strength of evidence** and **Contribution of the program to change** are the same for all 11 PAF qualitative indicators. The rubric for **Significance of change** is different for each indicator, the example below is the rubric for significance of instances of strengthened business environment. See PAF Technical Notes (Release 2, August 2018) for a complete set of verification assessment forms for all 11 indicators.

**Verification assessment form - Indicator 2. Instances of strengthened local business**

| | Rubric | | | Rating | Comments | Questions / clarifications |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Strength of evidence** | **High Strength** | **Moderate Strength** | **Low Strength** | | | |
| | • Evidence is derived from 3 or more sources. <br> • Data has been collected with reliable method and analysed to generate results. <br> • There is a clear and logical link between the narrative story and the evidence. | • Evidence is derived from at least 2 sources. <br> • Data has been collected but not analysed to generate results. <br> • The link between the narrative story and the evidence is somewhat clear but could be strengthened. | • Evidence is derived from one source or no source. <br> • Data was not collected or analysed. <br> • The narrative story is not based on evidence. | | | |
| **Significance of change** | **Highly Significant** | **Significant** | **Not significant** | | | |
| | • The business management or operations are substantially strengthened, e.g. staff skills, business management, infrastructure or supply system. <br> • The change produced a substantial increase in productivity, revenue or investment. <br> • The demonstrated improvements are likely to be sustained without ongoing support from Australia's development program. | • The business management or operations are moderately strengthened. <br> • The change produced a modest increase in productivity, revenue or investment. <br> • The demonstrated improvements may be sustained without ongoing support from Australia's development program. | • The change in business management or operations is a minor improvement. <br> • The change has not produced an increase in productivity, revenue or investment. <br> • The demonstrated improvements are unlikely to be sustained. | | | |
| **Contribution of the program to change** | **High Contribution** | **Moderate Contribution** | **Low Contribution** | | | |
| | • The program is considered to be the main contributor towards the change. | • The program is considered to be one of the contributor towards the change. | • The program's contribution towards the change is considered to be minimal. | | | |
| **Overall Assessment:  Highly significant / Significant / Not significant** | | | | | | |

# Annex 3: Verification Panel Report Template

| Section | |
|---|---|
| **PAF Indicator** | |
| **SSC Title** | |
| **Implementing Partner** | |
| **Date of verification** | |
| **Overall Assessment** <br> *(Highly significant /Significant / Not significant)* | |

| Detailed assessment | Final Assessment | Summary |
|---|---|---|
| Strength of evidence | *(High strength / Moderate strength / Low strength)* | |
| Significance of change | *(Highly significant / Significant / Not significant)* | |
| Contribution of the program to change | *(High contribution / Moderate contribution / Low contribution)* | |
| | | |
| Overall Assessment Summary | | |