

using the
Most
Significant
Change
Stories

a
Learning
History

from
COMPAS Sri Lanka

study report prepared by
A.M. Abeyratne

for
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Introduction

This document presents the learning history of how ETC COMPAS Sri Lanka together with two partner NGOs introduced Most Significant Change stories as a monitoring tool in project planning and implementation. The COMPAS program works with the endogenous development approach and its partners are specifically concerned with the attitudes and worldview of the rural target families, because these aspects heavily influence change processes and the durability of project impact in the long run. Traditional monitoring instruments are often less suitable to capture these qualitative and subtler aspects of the development process, and for this reason alternatives like the MSC stories tool (hereafter also abbreviated to MSC) are sought and tried out.

The learning history was prepared in response to a request from PSO and Development Policy Review Network (DPRN) as part of a larger research into quality planning, monitoring and evaluation methodologies. The main three sections - MSC in relation to Organisational Learning, Partner Relations and PM&E – are in concordance with the general outline stated in the Terms of Reference for this assignment. Preceding these, are two sections on COMPAS program background and on the introduction of MSC in the organisations involved

A series of interviews was conducted to obtain the views and learning experiences of different stakeholders (such as project leaders, community workers and community members) who are working to develop MSC as an effective tool in measuring spiritual aspects and qualitative changes resulting from project interventions.

During a recent workshop (28-30 September 2010) the use of MSC as a monitoring tool was analysed by MSC users and users of the logframe (LFA) monitoring system. The workshop ended with the encouraging understanding that MSC is an effective tool, if wisely used, which can be used to monitor the project outcome throughout the project cycle and assess the project impact at the last stage of the implementing period. This is especially relevant in view of the fact that a final evaluation often is not conducted properly due to various constraints.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that the collection and use of MSC stories described in these pages started in 2009 when the organisations involved had already reached their program targets set for 2010. The overall programme target for 2010 was set in 2007 as follows: “Poverty reduced, measured by at least 50% of the indicators in 50% of the Community Based Organisations”. The working method of the study has been as follows:

- Discussion with the COMPAS Sri Lanka coordinator about the objectives of the assignment
- Study of literature on MSC as a tool for assessing and monitoring qualitative changes
- Conducting interviews with two NGO program directors about their development approach and the introduction of MSC in their organisations
- Discussion with field coordinators involved in collecting MSC stories
- Discussion with selected community members previously interviewed by field coordinators
- Second round of discussion with NGO staff to understand the process of learning and the benefits of using MSC for monitoring the development of community well-being
- Draft document discussed with the COMPAS Sri Lankan coordinator and forwarded to the ETC COMPAS program manager for comments
- Participation in a three-day workshop on developing MSC as a complementary tool to assess the impact and monitor the progress of community well-being projects
- Writing of the final report

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<i>Report prepared by:</i> <i>A.M. Abeyratne</i> <i>Uva Research And Training Institute</i> <i>Pattiyagedara, Sri Lanka</i> <i>Urti2004@yahoo.com</i>	
<i>Editing & layout:</i> <i>Dennis Hurkmans</i>	

About the COMPAS program and Endogenous Development

“We were frustrated because the agricultural practices we pursued did not give expected results. Our land was devastated and production was decreasing year after year. Gradually our indebtedness rose, while our earning capacity diminished. The new system gave us new life, because it taught us to do a better job with available resources, and be happy with what we have instead of craving for what we do not”
(Sanath, FIOH field coordinator)

Local NGOs in Sri Lanka largely share the view that efforts made during the last five decades through so-called modernized agricultural systems (epitomized by the term Green Revolution) have failed in assisting the majority of poor community members living in rural areas to come out of the poverty trap. As a viable alternative, the ETC COMPAS network values the ‘endogenous’ quality of any development effort. Basically, this involves understanding and supporting the well-being of the community members from a holistic perspective, involving material, social as well as spiritual aspects.

ABOUT ETC COMPAS AND ENDOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA

COMPAS stands for Comparing and Supporting Endogenous Development. It is an international network - coordinated by ETC Foundation, the Netherlands, and spanning 15 countries - that implements field programs to develop, test and improve endogenous development methodologies. Endogenous development is based on local peoples' own criteria of development, and takes into account their material, social and spiritual well-being. The program is mainly funded by the Dutch governmental development agency DGIS.

In Sri Lanka, COMPAS is engaged in the Community-led Natural Resources Management Program, working with three NGOs that implement endogenous development programs: Future in Our Hands (FIOH), Biodiversity Research and Training centre (BRIT) and Gami Seva Sevana (GSS). This learning history focuses on two of these, FIOH and BRIT, that implemented the MSC tool. Their field activities include:

- Revitalisation of traditional farming knowledge and practice, applying traditional methods, seeds and ethnoveterinary practices for organic farming purposes (FIOH and GSS)
- Revitalisation of traditional Vaasthu-architecture, integrating housing and home gardening (BRIT)

Related activities of the COMPAS Sri Lanka network include: capacity building of all involved NGOs and Community Based Organisations, methodology development and university collaboration, documentation and publication, conducting policy dialogue.

The COMPAS Sri Lankan network is coordinated by Mr. K.A.J. Kahandawa of FIOH. The overall program manager, based in the international coordination office of the COMPAS network at ETC Foundation, is Wim Hiemstra.

COMPAS Sri Lanka has implemented development programs throughout the country in cooperation with selected NGOs that follow the endogenous development approach. Main objective of these NGOs is to revitalize indigenous knowledge of agriculture and animal husbandry, thereby focusing on nature-friendly, sustainable systems. The endogenous development approach embraces the worldview, values and rituals of the community and considers these to form the basis for sustainable development. It enables that basic needs are satisfied while natural resources are well-managed, ensuring the harmony between man and nature. Including spiritual aspects of human behaviour, in addition to material and social development, makes the difference in endogenous development.

FIOH and BRIT (see textbox page 2) are two community organisations working to improve the quality of life of their target families by implementing community programs that include spiritual development. Their development philosophy is based on the idea that a human being is a part of his natural environment, without which he can not survive. As such they always propagated and promoted development activities that strengthen positive and constructive relationships between man and nature. Another important element is motivating and facilitating the community to achieve their personal as well as social goals through collective work. Both organisations firmly believe that never-ending competition between individuals leads to the overexploitation and irreversible devastation of natural resources. The majority of today's environmental and social problems are the outcome of so-called modern development activities, which have left the world and mankind in a very vulnerable position.

With assistance from the COMPAS program, FIOH and BRIT could strengthen their efforts in reviving and developing indigenous knowledge, attitudes and practices. Although these had proven their worth in the past, people had neglected them for a certain period due to the influence of the green revolution and globalization. The main features of the projects implemented under COMPAS so far, show commitment to sustainable development by promoting constructive relationships between nature and mankind and among communities themselves. Simply put, the transition from chemical to organic farming often goes with a complete turn-around of community life. The endogenous development approach strengthens the idea of holistic development and gives a new meaning to the concept of well-being.

Ariyapala, a farmer explains how the endogenous development program helped her to materialize spiritual thoughts in agriculture. "What I liked most was that the FIOH officers explained that the lives of all creatures are important in traditional farming. Earlier I had a feeling that some animals are harmful and should be destroyed in order to save crops. That's how the agriculture officers had taught us. I did it, although it was against my conscience. I liked and grabbed at the idea that every animal has a right to live. And I learnt how to cultivate without harming any animal. I also learned that some animals I killed earlier are actually beneficial to my crops. And I learned and experimented how to effectively manage the crop using Buddhist chanting and kems" (R.M. Ariyapala, male farmer, FIOH)

"I was very shy when I joined the groups organised by the FIOH organisation. But I participated a lot in training, was able to become an office bearer and now I work for the organisation" (D.M. Pemawathi, female farmer-field officer, FIOH)

MAIN FEATURES OF THE ENDOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT APPROACH IN SRI LANKA

- All project objectives and indicators are designed by the community according to their worldview and perception of development.
- Support organisations respect the worldview of the community and propose no actions conflicting with it.
- Project design and implementation is geared to the know-how of target families and to the resources available to them in their immediate (natural) environment.
- Project objectives are directly linked with the main livelihoods of families and communities, such as rearing cattle and growing food crops. An emphasis on slight changes in day-to-day practices, minimizing the extra demands placed on beneficiaries, leads to better results in terms of spiritual and mental satisfaction.
- Target groups are motivated to appreciate the mental satisfaction derived from the proposed activity rather than craving for material benefits, which often causes mental stress and leads to overexploitation of nature and human labour.

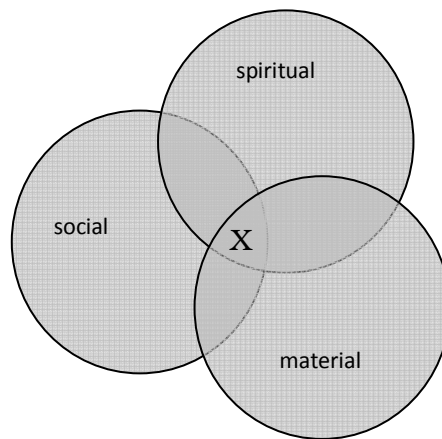
For a long time, the Sri Lankan lifestyle was based on religious teaching. Communities measured the success of a person in terms of his behaviour in society, not by the material wealth he accumulated. Even in the recent past people who earned wealth through antisocial means were not respected. Life's generally accepted motto was: 'Well-being in this world and guarantee of a better life in the next world' (or: *Melowa yahapath ha paralowa sugatiya*). These social values and way-of-life were eroded when material wealth became the dominant value. Under the influence of the Green Revolution, globalization and rapid development, society was turned upside down. In their attempt to accumulate material wealth, people were compelled to give up valuable

human qualities, that earlier helped them to survive any disastrous situation. Another negative impact on communities was the deepening gap between expectations and actual achievements in social and economic life, due to the rising cost of agricultural inputs and decreasing fertility of the land and lower output.

“I studied ethnoveterinary practice (EVP) but was not able to practice it, because the people preferred to go to the governmental veterinary instead. No one wanted to use my knowledge. I had no student. But then the organisation formed a group of practitioners and recognised us. Also I was able to transfer my knowledge by writing a book on EVP. Now I am getting recognition as a teacher” (A.J. Juwanis, EVP Practitioner, FIOH)

In this context, re-introduction of the traditional way of life proved beneficial to the communities. The endogenous development concept clearly shows that ignoring spiritual aspects of human behaviour leads to an incomplete analysis. When the project rationale is based only on information about the material and social status of the area or community, the outcome will not be effective. Past experiences have shown that projects that do not respect and follow the worldview of the target community, fail for the single reason that they do not get the commitment of the community. The worldview can be understood only through examining the belief system of the community. Well-being is where social, material AND spiritual aspirations are met. The majority of modern development planning methodologies do not consider this spiritual aspect as an important component in the development effort. As such, social and material outcomes are considered to be more important when measuring results.

WELL-BEING: ‘X’ MARKS THE PLACE TO BE



“We used to cultivate vegetables and other crops using chemicals. That was the advice we got from the agricultural extension officers. Later I realized that we were eating food with so much poison, and also killing animals. But I had no alternative. My family was always sick with frequent stomach pains and fever. I was worried about my children. For the last 2 years, since the FIOH-intervention, my crops do not need any chemicals. Not only are they poison-free, they are tasty too. Nowadays we do not need to go to hospitals” (K. Bandulahta, female farmer, FIOH)

Another objective of any community development programme is to ensure the sustainability of the project outcome through improvement of leadership qualities of beneficiary groups. The COMPAS project has immensely contributed to enhance leadership qualities of target group members, which becomes clear from the statements of Premawathi and Juwanis who joined the COMPAS project through FIOH (see margin).

Knowledge enlargement is another of the major objectives figuring in any community empowerment program. The impact of the COMPAS program can be illustrated by the statement of farmer Bandulahta (see left).

The need for a new tool: Most Significant Change stories

The statements from beneficiaries quoted in the preceding pages, are in fact fragments derived from the Most Significant Change stories that were collected to assess the outcome and impact of the COMPAS program in 2009. These MSC stories reveal the, sometimes quite subtle, changes in the minds, attitudes, perceptions and lives of the beneficiaries, and thereby provide valuable information, not only for purposes of impact review but potentially also for monitoring purposes.

However, COMPAS Sri Lanka started its planning process back in 2007 using the Logical Framework or Logframe Approach (hereafter LFA), which is the standard approach for planning development programs. LFA is used to identify, and subsequently monitor, quantitative indicators for measuring project outcome. Even qualitative changes are measured through quantitative indicators. In order to define the COMPAS program's well-being goals, the partner NGOs conducted a tedious planning process using LFA. The main indicators agreed upon dealt with the material and social dimensions (see Annex). During planning workshops, the participation of the beneficiaries was solicited and the indicators were thus considered to reflect the real expectations of the communities. Also, one indicator was added in an attempt to capture the spiritual dimensions as well.

Soon it became clear that the holistic development approach adopted by the COMPAS partners, demands a monitoring system that captures the internal changes and mental satisfaction of the community in a better way. The indicators developed through LFA have some limitations:

- Well-being is a complex concept which cannot be reduced to a few pre-identified indicators
- LFA indicators are pre-identified and do not capture information about unintended or unforeseen outcomes
- Spiritual and cultural development aspects are virtually not addressed by the indicators.

This is clearly expressed by BRIT program leader, Mr. Attanayake: "When reporting on achievements using well-being indicators, we gave figures and percentages. But these figures are not meaningful to explain the changes in the mindset of the people and do not reflect the attitudinal and behavioural changes taking place in a community or individual. Most Significant Change stories provided a satisfactory alternative." Likewise, FIOH director Mr. Jayasinghe says: "Our projects are not about large material outputs. Instead, we aim at a behavioural change based on sound and positive attitudes. We need the community to think in terms of the holistic impact of their activity. For example, practicing organic farming may not be visible in output. But it will enrich people's health and environment and give a greater satisfaction to the person engaged. This change is not reflected in numbers or percentages."

On these grounds, COMPAS Sri Lanka coordinator Mr. Kahandawa took the initiative to use an alternative system, the MSCS approach, for measuring essential attitudinal and behavioral changes occurring among target communities as a result of project intervention. The tool was introduced to two NGOs, FIOH and BRIT, through a staff training programme. It is used as a complementary tool to elaborate the unexpected outcomes and quantitatively immeasurable spiritual and mental changes. The use of MSC as a monitoring tool is an important and meaningful step, because it provides

One of the 10 indicators FIOH uses for monitoring well-being addresses the spiritual dimension: "All the target families are engaged in spiritual activities by performing Nekath, Kem and Pooja in crop and cattle farming". See Annex for all indicators.

Mr. Kahandawa explains his strategy and objectives as follows: "In the COMPAS programme we use a logical frame work monitoring system with indicators for measuring change. We attempted to develop indicators to measure social change and spirituality but that proved difficult. We came up with few indirect indicators but it was almost impossible to include spiritual aspects in the usual reporting. MSC is a way of doing qualitative monitoring and now we are trying it out."

community workers with the means to assess and appreciate the results of their intervention. Measuring a project's achievements in quantities (figures and percentages) is not adequate for catching the subtle but long lasting changes in human behaviour.

The collection and use of Most Significant Change stories as a tool for monitoring and evaluation was designed to minimize the above-mentioned limitations of the existing method. MSC stories are meant to complement the LFA indicators, not for use as a stand-alone method for monitoring.

MSC IN THE WIDER DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

In line with the overall demand for more clarity on concrete results from development cooperation, and because ETC and COMPAS partners received regular comments that the endogenous development approach is complex and not easy to grasp, it was agreed that the 2007-2010 program would focus on developing community-based methodologies to define indicators to measure progress.

When the program started in 2007, all COMPAS partners in 15 countries developed a baseline study and agreed with the communities on well-being targets for 2010. These targets were translated into measurable indicators. In the course of 2008-2009, it was noted from the progress reports that a focus on quantitative indicators alone would not yield enough qualitative information on the change processes taking place in the communities and on the importance of worldviews in these changes. Also, among Dutch development organisations there was an ongoing debate on the balance between quantitative and qualitative monitoring tools.

Furthermore, COMPAS was looking for a tool for comparing changes across gender and across generation. Discussion of these dilemmas during regional meetings of COMPAS partner organizations led to the proposal to try out complementary means of qualitative monitoring, change stories next to quantitative measurement of indicators. Some partner organizations had been trained in MSC earlier and had been using MSC stories, but not in a systematic way.

A proposal was developed to have one partner organisation in each continent collect a larger quantity of change stories, to enable comparison of change across gender and generation and to reflect on the methodology. Sri Lanka was the first country to embark on this endeavour in 2008 and Ghana and Bolivia started in 2010. Within the ETC Foundation, there are also other network experiences with qualitative monitoring, such as outcome mapping (RUAF) and of late also change stories (Prolinnova). ETC is comparing these experiences across networks, to facilitate learning among the networks.

This textbox contains background information provided by Mr. Wim Hiemstra, program coordinator of ETC COMPAS

Anusha, one of the FIOH field coordinators, explains how the process changed her outlook: "I was working for a multinational company exporting plants and flowers in Kurunegala.

Mr. Kahandawa has used the experiences presented by different researchers, such as Rick Davies and Jess Dart, for developing a monitoring tool to capture the qualitative changes resulting from project interventions. The practical implementation of the MSC stories collection by the two NGOs has been a mix of training and field work, starting with a one-day awareness raising training program (March 2009), followed by various rounds of story collection, alternated with discussion of the intermediate results, fine-tuning of methods and addition of new elements (see the following overview).

THE MSC PROCESS OF COMPAS SRI LANKA AT A GLANCE

- March 2009. Introduction of the MSC tool during a one-day awareness raising training program.
- April-May 2009. Collection of 24 MSC stories by each NGO, followed by their analysis in a workshop to learn qualitative aspects of stories. This exercise improved the capacity of organizations to use MSC for measuring qualitative changes.
- June 2009. Introduction of spiritual aspects to improve the validity of MSC stories as measuring tool. Discussion with farmers about the relationship between agricultural practices and community worldviews. This led to a change of vision and practices of NGOs concerning project monitoring.
- July 2009. NGO staff were facilitated to select the 24 most important stories out of 48 and rewrite them to reflect real changes among community members due to project interventions. This benefited the capacity of staff members to use MSC stories as monitoring tool and at the same time maintain close interaction with target groups.
- August 2009. Introduction of gender and generation aspects in MSC stories, allowing three categories of community members (father, mother and son or daughter) to present their opinion through MSC stories. This exercise improved the organisational learning on project monitoring through different points of view, rather than just the view of the direct beneficiary. The process added a new dimension to the project's monitoring methodology.
- August 2009. Initiated training in the use of video filming for project reporting purposes.
- Since January 2010, staff members use their video presentation skills to strengthen the MSC process. This process helped the staff members to improve their skills in maintaining a strong partner relationship.
- September 2010. A three-day workshop (Badulla, 28-30 September 2010), for MSC users and other NGO officers new to the MSC process, contributed to improvement and knowledge sharing about the use of MSC as an effective tool for monitoring qualitative changes in project outcome.

My duty was to check whether the recruited farmers were following company instructions in the correct manner. But here the situation is different. We go to the farmer without a pre-identified plan. Farmers are encouraged to develop their own plans and indicators according to their worldview. We never contradict the farmer's view on his life and the world, and encourage him to go his own way. We only fill the gaps in his knowledge, in preparing compost and other natural things needed for organic farming. I have observed that facilitating farmers to learn to work with the natural resources available around them, instead of giving them unachievable targets, produces very good results. This process helps them to be happy individually and collectively through sharing and helping each other. As the process moves forward, farmers have achieved a lot by becoming leaders, facilitators, researchers and resource persons with self-esteem. The MSC process provided them with an opportunity to explain what they had achieved" (Anusha, FIOH field coordinator)

The use of MSC and organisational learning

How did the MSC process influence the capacity of the two NGOs and COMPAS Sri Lanka as a network to continuously learn from practice? How has this capacity evolved over time? Has learning derived from the MSC process been applied in subsequent practice? How did the various stakeholders experience the process?

First of all, the MSC process had a positive impact on the project management and monitoring processes of both FIOH and BRIT. Implementing the MSC process, provided the organisations with a forum for open discussion about the development effort and the results achieved by staff and community. How this works in practice, becomes clear from the words of staff member Sanath: “We all participate in the field monitoring of the collection of MSC stories. Our director Mr. Jayasinghe sits with the community and participates in the discussions as their equal. This encouraged us to be closer to the community. This closeness deepened through collection of MSC stories from other members.” According to Mr. Jayasinghe, the facilitators of a project should be part of the process of change. “Anusha, one of the field coordinators, has turned into a real friend of the farming community, instead of just an instructor. Collecting MSC stories gave her a good opportunity to understand farmers in their real social context.”

It took some further experience and training in communication skills for the field staff to perfect their interview techniques. By discussing the stories collected at every stage, it soon became clear that story collectors were less skilled in addressing the spiritual aspect. The question “why” people do things in a particular way, was a difficult one. FIOH field coordinator Sandamali explains she had to learn how to reveal the changes in attitudes and behaviour of the beneficiaries: “Systematic questioning of the same person made clear the spiritual change behind a particular behavioral change. At first it was only a story, but later it became a revelation of changed mindset.” Actually, all respondents revealed how their social and family status was changed for the better.

How the collection of MSC stories became a learning experience for all involved, becomes extra clear when compared to the traditional way of collecting monitoring data. As explained by BRIT staff member Bandu, the information collected for each LFA indicator through a questionnaire did not reveal the actual change in individuals and communities, because these indicators are seldom understood by the beneficiaries in precisely the way the planner had in mind. But once the MSC process started and the beneficiary could narrate his or her experience, a lot of new information came out. It helped the organisation and the community to review the impact of particular activities, and also brought to the surface hitherto unidentified skills and capacities of community members. “The capacity of BRIT has improved through the identification of so many leaders and resource persons at ground level.”

FIOH field coordinator Sandamali explains how she experienced the process: “Under COMPAS we worked with 100 farmers, cattle rearers and traditional veterinaries. We facilitated farmers to use compost and natural weeds and insect control methods instead of chemical farming. We also facilitated them to work collectively in the field, adopting the formerly used *attham* method, where farmers work together to complete all the work in their fields. Further, we facilitated the reviving of traditional rituals to obtain the blessing of natural forces for the protection and prosperity of the farm. All these activities enabled the community to uphold their traditional values and social

*An example of how MSC stories reveal change at a deeper level:
“Today we live a very happy life. The stigma of caste has been washed away by education, money and responsible social behaviour. Our children have reached a satisfactory level on the social ladder. Now everyone in the village can come to our house and enjoy our hospitality. Those who did not like to speak to our children, now speak with a kind heart and a pleasant face” (R. A. Gnanawathi from Tharala village)*

relationships and ties. The MSC process helped us to improve and strengthen the understanding of and commitment towards a revival of traditional values among the target families. The whole process helped the community and field staff to experience self-esteem and satisfaction.”

A profound way in which the MSC process fostered organisational learning is connected closely to the philosophy behind endogenous development. BRIT program leader Mr. Attanayake explains that unlike the majority of organisations engaged in poverty reduction, that are concerned only with material and social indicators, BRIT always links its activities with real attitudinal changes. “Our ultimate goal is to motivate the community to be nature lovers. The biggest challenge we face is to assess whether the basic concept we introduce is adopted and practiced by the community. Because only superficial implementation of activities does not create sustainable results. The MSC process made us think more deeply about this aspect of project planning and monitoring.”

One example of the change that took place due to this learning, is the introduction of children’s activities in the program. In most cases, the parents explained that their knowledge is not passing to future generations. So children’s clubs were started by BRIT. In FIOH the conscious inclusion of rituals (practiced in traditional farming, but eroded due to the influence of modernised agriculture practices) at different stages of cultivation was another change that took place due to learning.

Another important learning instance came to Mr. Attanayake when conducting MSC discussion in the village. In traditional project monitoring and evaluation, only the answers and opinions of the direct beneficiaries are recorded for monitoring purposes. MSC stories revealed that it is important to understand whether the project outcome has had any meaningful impact on other family members as well, because the holistic COMPAS program envisages development of all family members. BRIT subsequently made the innovative, and fruitful, step to interview family members.

During the workshop in September 2010 (see textbox page 7) the following model was used to clarify the experiences of FIOH and BRIT with measuring outcomes according to LFA indicators and MSC stories:

<i>If outcomes are...</i>	<i>expected</i>	<i>unexpected</i>
<i>of agreed significance</i>	predefined indicators are most useful	MSC is useful
<i>of disagreed significance</i>	indicators are useful and MSC is useful	MSC is most useful

Out of this exercise came the realisation that the LFA indicators of change are useful in the cases where “the outcomes are agreed and expected/intended” only. If outcomes are not agreed and also were not expected, there is no way to develop indicators, and a method like MSC can prove very useful. It appeared that both NGOs encountered only few agreed and expected outcomes that were already mentioned in the logframe. Instead, the more important outcomes were not expected and therefore not listed at the beginning. The model shows how LFA indicators and MSC stories can co-exist and

Sometimes MSC stories shed light in retrospect: “There was an incidence where our proposal to increase household incomes by breeding village hens was not accepted by the community. We failed in this facilitation. Later the MSC revealed the real reason to reject out proposal. Villagers did not like to breed animal for meat because it is against their worldview. This is a very good point to stress that any project planning or implementation should learn and respect the worldview of the target group. Before prescribing solutions to problems faced by the community project planners should deeply think about the attitudes of beneficiaries” (Mr. Attanayake of BRIT)

together measure the total outcome of the project.

A final important learning experience was the idea that MSC stories can be used to measure the project impact during the implementation stage itself. Although evaluation constitutes in theory an important part of the project cycle, it is a general trend that in many projects impact evaluation is not done for a number of practical reasons. This trend threatens to create a big void in lessons learned for future reference. Using MSC in a methodical manner during project implementation will be part of a solution to this problematic situation.

All things considered, MSC is a tool that enhances organisational learning in terms of flexibility to accommodate the real needs of the communities and respond positively and timely. MSC provides the information needed for this task in a very effective manner as shown in the experiences of both organisations.

MSC and partner relations

How has working with MSC affected partner relations: relations between beneficiaries, staff and program directors? What changes have different COMPAS Sri Lanka field staff and program directors experienced? Were these changes only positive or also challenging – and if so, how were the challenges met?

Using MSC for progress monitoring has contributed to improved partner relations in the organisations facilitating the COMPAS project. The MSC process is not an individual activity but a collective effort where several layers of officers in the organisation work together. From the introductory session onwards, the two NGOs together with the COMPAS coordinator followed a team approach in order to produce effective results. By participating in the collective MSC process (see textbox page 7) everyone has acquired new techniques and knowledge.

From the start, COMPAS Sri Lanka implements a bottom-up approach meaning that the NGOs together with beneficiaries decide on all aspects of the project. Also, a lot of thought went into the spiritual component of the project, in planning, implementation and M&E. For the sustainability of project achievements, actual change in the attitudes and behaviour of beneficiaries is essential. Mr. Kahandawa, Sri Lankan COMPAS coordinator, explains his experience in the process: “To assure this commitment from the beneficiaries, I instructed the partners of COMPAS to respect their worldview and start from there. And I was looking for a tool to measure spiritual changes, in addition to material and social indicators. Introducing MSC to the partner organisations proved to be a real challenge, because to my knowledge it has in Sri Lanka never been used for dealing with spiritual aspects. Repeated training workshops and extensive field work gave some understanding to the staff of FIOH and BRIT about the MSC process.”

According to Mr. Attanayake of BRIT the MSC process is based on a positive and constructive relationship among different stakeholders. He explains the process of collecting MSC stories in his organisation. “First we discussed the process in the organisation and we defined our roles clearly. Our field coordinator Ms. Gnanawathi coordinated the collection in the field and informed the families. Later, me and Bandu, a member of our research board, visited the houses. Bandu questioned the interviewee while I took notes, and afterwards Bandu wrote the story from my notes. But the first stories were not up to the expectation of Mr. Kahandawa, so he conducted a workshop to enhance our interviewing skills. In all, it was a collective effort. The process created a better understanding among the three of us, as well as with the community members, and strengthened our professional relationship.”

MSC is a good tool for tapping the door and open up unexpressed feelings and ideas about the intervention, by proper questioning and probing, says BRIT staff member Bandu (see also example on the right). At first he did not participate in the collection itself, while he thought that by simply writing out the stories he could capture their essence, the Most Significant Change, in the correct manner. But that attempt failed, because an MSC story is not ‘just a story’, and BRIT decided to re-organize the work under guidance of the COMPAS coordinator Mr. Kahandawa. Bandu: “We understood and agreed that this is the collective responsibility of all concerned. This insight refreshed our relationships in terms of responsibility towards performing our task in a productive manner.”

An unexpected bonus: “Some of the stories revealed emotional and sensitive experiences of the interviewee. Within this emotional and sensitive story one could catch the Most Significant Change we are looking for. It also paved the way for better understanding and attachment, which in turn motivated the interviewee to give better information about the project activity. This attitudinal and behavioural change can be considered as an unexpected outcome of the MSC process. Furthermore, this honesty and feeling of mutual obligation spread across the whole organisation, irrespective of people’s status as paid worker or volunteer or other differences. This change of relationship and attachment contributed to improve the quality of physical data collected by the organization” (staff member Mr. Attanayake of BRIT)

MSC also addresses spiritual subject matter: *“Although I am too old to work in the garden, I am an active member of the wisdom forum, formed by BRIT in the village. I worked as the leader of grand milk mother team in the village [a team of elderly mothers who visit houses to accept dana (alms) as representatives of the goddess Pathini]. In addition to this activity, I lead the annual Deva Dana festival under the Bo-tree. Earlier this festival was directed by a male. But with the awareness created by BRIT, the community has accepted that a capable woman also can perform the task. And now my daughter follows in my footsteps, and I am happy and proud that the position of womenfolk has been elevated through knowledge, skills and attitudes”* (D.M. Lokuhamine, 78 year, from Sirimalgoda)

“The villagers do not treat us as outside officers. There was an emotional attachment among all who took part in the intervention process. Working for community was not an external thing for us. It was part of our life. Collecting MSC stories was a culmination of this changing process” (FIOH field coordinator Anusha)

Motivating beneficiaries to reveal the crucial changing points, turned out to be an art to learn. Success herein depends mostly on the relationship established between staff members and community. In more than one respect, the MSC process itself changed this relationship. Most important of these changes is that all staff involved became practitioners of all good habits. Chanting *pirith* and participating in rituals, using chemical-free food items, living an honest life; these are the major components of the traditional system of healing and well-being. Also, there is a belief in the influence of natural and supernatural powers on the life of average persons. Together these form the worldview of the rural community in Sri Lanka. “We increased our commitment and decided to be practitioners rather than preachers. We actively participated in spiritual activities organised in the village, and in our office meetings and other events we followed the same practices.” This was appreciated by the community and they more willingly revealed the changes in their lives as a result of project interventions.

The officers of FIOH, like those of BRIT, adhere since long to the same social philosophy as the one behind the COMPAS approach. The imposition of changes in attitude, away from the collective and geared to the individual, is considered contrary to the natural living and thinking pattern of rural communities. Implementation of the COMPAS project was therefore easy for them, says FIOH director Mr. Jayasinghe. But the MSC process provided them with a different challenge. “Measuring the area of land cleared or terracing completed, the number of seedlings planted or man-days spent, is easily done through LFA indicators. But making the people speak from the heart about mental changes behind a particular behavioural change is the important thing. For this exercise our field officers had to change themselves. They had to follow a different approach to win the confidence of the community and be closer to them.”

Mr. Kahandawa clearly says that using MSC has contributed to empower the staff members of two NGOs and the community participating in project activities. This aspect is very important, because the ultimate objective of any community development program is empowerment of the target group. The realisation that COMPAS and MSC have paved the way towards this end is a commendable achievement.

From all the above, it becomes clear that the implementation of the MSC process stimulated new ways of cooperation and discussion between staff members. Furthermore, the relation between staff, project employees and beneficiaries intensified and developed into forms of attachment. The effective sharing of knowledge and experiences among all the stakeholders is an essential requirement in understanding the real needs of the communities. MSC is a tool that requires the active participation of all stakeholders. Constant and effective communication is a strong quality of MSC that enhances partner relationships. The collection of stories grew into something more than the pure gathering of data and became part of the change process itself: telling, writing and reading these MSC stories raises the stakeholders’ awareness of the level of change and possibly contributes to its durability.

MSC and the organisation's vision of PM & E

The assumption within ETC COMPAS is that MSC is not just a method of PM&E, but an alternative framework or mindset regarding the nature and purpose of development (holistic well-being of community members), its results and sphere of influence. If this is the case, how has the vision of the various people in the organisation changed, in particular regarding holistic development of community members? Has it changed regarding PM&E in general? Wherein lies the difference between working with MSC and the Logical Framework Approach?

The endogenous development approach followed under COMPAS, including attention to spiritual development and with community well-being as the main objective, soon brought to light the inadequacy of the LFA measuring tools. For example, the vision of BRIT (well-being for this world and guarantee of a better life for the next world - *melowa yahapath ha paralowa sugatiya*) implies that a better life in the next world after death is entirely based on intentionally good work done during this life, and is deeply rooted in the worldview of the community. The corresponding LFA indicators used were: number of *dhana* (alms for innocent and poor people) given, *sramadana* attended (voluntary work for the common good), religious rituals attended, etcetera. Information was collected by questioning the beneficiaries. BRIT staff member Attanayake: "It was not clear whether the answers were genuine and the interviewer did not have a way to go beyond the reply. This was not a satisfactory situation and we were wondering about a new method to measure spiritual changes, because it is upon these that the success of our project depends."

Mr. Jayasinghe of FIOH concurs: "In our traditional agriculture the practice of protecting natural resources was prevalent. Farmers always gave due consideration to natural resources and forces that influence the natural living. This worldview was based on the Buddhist philosophy that man is part of the natural setting and he does not have a right to exploit natural resources at the expense of other living beings. Norms and values, rituals and taboos were meant to control excessive human activities. According to Buddhist philosophy human beings ought to be satisfied with what they have at the moment. People are induced to control their craving for everything they see and feel through the five precepts known as *pansil*. Under this guidance people were facilitated to think in terms of compassion and love for others. This is how the traditional farmer practiced sustainable farming for a long period. "

Project activities under COMPAS were designed to support the above mentioned social philosophy. When farmers are suggested to take part in *sramadana* and share his work and capacity with others, it means that there should be mental conviction to deviate from hitherto followed practice. This type of change cannot be measured quantitatively. When on the other hand a farmer is asked to explain WHY he or she participated in a particular activity, he delves into his own mind to find the answer. Also, it is found that people give a more honest and genuine explanation once they are engaged in a true dialogue and feel respected.

The organisational vision on PM&E has changed by using MSC for collection of information. With the introduction of COMPAS and MSC, both NGOs have paid greater attention to the quality aspect and to the influence of project activities on the worldview of the beneficiaries and vice versa. As explained earlier, COMPAS always put

"Well-being is attached to the mental status and worldview of a person. Agricultural practices introduced under COMPAS are not profitable in the current sense. At the beginning some community members thought organic farming meant more work for less results. Convincing them of the long term benefits of organic farming was a challenging one. People have to accept the importance of protecting the natural environment at the expense of personal gain. This requires a great commitment and conviction. Well-being indicators should measure this commitment and conviction. It cannot be measured with figures and percentages. MSC helped us to measure this complicated indicator" (Mr. Bandu, member of the BRIT progress monitoring team)

the emphasis on the sustainability of project results, even in the most competitive and challenging environment. This helped to avoid the kind of instance whereby the results produced by NGO activities are nullified by competitive behaviour and by commercial interests of multinational producers of agricultural chemicals. COMPAS partners understood this and strategically used the concept of worldview, which is deeply rooted in the culture of the target communities.

Collecting data the LFA and the MSC way: "Anybody can collect figures about a given activity; the farmer answers the field officer simply with yes, no or a number. But these data do not really reflect the actual situation in the mind of the farmer. With spiritual changes, it is very important to know whether a farmer is acting according to his heart, because any person can give away some money or goods for the sake of fulfilling a project requirement or to satisfy somebody who helped him. But this type of superficial giving away is not based on a changed worldview" (Sanath, FIOH field coordinator

The introduction of MSC also proved supportive of the endogenous development approach. Mr. Attanayake of BRIT explains that monitoring the adoption of their vision (well-being in this life, better living in the next) by the target group was something of a struggle. "Information regarding current living can be collected through normal indicators. But evaluating the other part, better living in the next life, cannot be measured through physical activities. It is easy to motivate the community to be consciously and intentionally good in mind and deed in this life to assure a better life in the next birth. But the challenge is collecting information on this inner mental situation. Introduction of MSC at this juncture was an encouraging move."

Furthermore Attanayake found that the MSC method gives the beneficiary control over the information he provides. With conventional methods, his position as provider of information is a passive one and he has no active and positive sense of ownership regarding the information collected and the results emanating from the process. But MSC puts the information-giver in the foreground and he will be self-motivated to think like a visionary person because he feels that he reveals his soul in the form of a story. The term 'visionary' as used here, describes someone who is rooted relatively firm and secure in the present and is thus able to look into his own and the community's future.

The use of MSC stories does not mean the existing M&E system has become obsolete. Earlier, under 'MSC and organisational learning', we saw how the LFA and MSC approach can be used side by side. LFA indicators are used for expected outcomes of agreed significance, and MSC for all unexpected outcomes. In addition, MSC can provide valuable information where outcomes are expected but their significance is still debated (see model on page 9). COMPAS coordinator Mr. Kahandawa explains: "We have not abandoned the existing monitoring system. It is important to have quantitative information. But the existing monitoring system does not account for quality. So now we use both."

BRIT staff member Bandu adds that LFA is an excellent instrument for project planning and monitoring. It helps planners to understand and identify certain matters well ahead of time. This enables the implementors to take timely action in order to maximize results of the project for the community. MSC is a supplement to LFA, to measure progress in holistic development. In addition, the MSC process has led to an improved quality of quantitative information, due to the better understanding it created with the community members. Also it helped the organisation to find out many new things about the beneficiaries and ground level project activities, sometimes resulting in the identification of new resource persons.

In all, COMPAS partners are committed to promote the type of endogenous development in which the community well-being is defined in a holistic manner. Conventional PM&E methods did not help to understand this complex situation. The MSC method proved to be an effective tool in understanding the complexity of the communities and respond accordingly.

Finally, it should be remembered that the experience of COMPAS Sri Lanka with MSC stories as a PM&E tool has been largely confined to an assessment of the outcome AFTER the NGOs had completed their programs. The stories therefore testify mostly of the positive changes in the lives of the target families. One of the learning instances is that MSC seems very promising as a monitoring instrument as well, where it could be used for timely project adjustments or revisions. Also, the possible use of MSC during the situation analysis or planning stage has to be explored further.

“Before prescribing solutions to problems faced by the community project planners should deeply think about the attitudes of beneficiaries. Once we failed in a facilitation [see page 9]. Any project planning or implementation should learn and respect the worldview of the target group” (Attanayake of BRIT)

Limitations and suggestions for improving the MSC tool

The MSC stories in the learning history are without exception positive. Is it possible to add some of the challenges? This question from PSO, was replied to by Mr. Kahandawa as follows: "In order to clarify whether it is possible to have 'negative or not so positive' stories, we had lengthy discussions during the three-day workshop. The general consensus was that such stories are more suitable at the 'situation analysis' stage before any project intervention and can hence be used at the planning stage. Also, when the intervention is underway and there is disagreement or dissatisfaction among the beneficiaries, negative stories can be used as a basis for re-planning or revising the project interventions. The challenges we have encountered are mostly about the communication. In order to get a real situation explained in a story, the person facilitating the process should be a good facilitator"

First of all, the validity and reality of MSC stories can be doubtful. This depends on whether the storyteller will have time to spend and whether he will tell the truth. Both ideas are based on concepts foreign to the Sri Lankan culture. Endogenous development projects are implemented to improve the lives of communities in micro-societies, where the community members will have little time to explain all that is happening while they are busily working on their daily activities inside and outside the project. On the other hand, if the beneficiaries are enthusiastic they will want to share their experiences. Still, one has to be careful in using the tool for establishing objective ground realities in societies where stories are fabricated to spread mythical ideas through exaggerations.

Second, the continued or recurrent invitation to beneficiaries to relate MSC stories, will lead to mechanical renderings and lessen their ethical value. This challenge can be overcome by giving a comprehensive training to story collectors and make theirs a professional task. Also, convincing the selected beneficiaries that they are performing an essential role when telling MSC stories can help. Some time and effort is needed to develop these qualities.

A possible limitation (but at the same time a challenge) is that much depends on the skills of the facilitator, who has to be very good communicator with probing and listening skills and who should be able to develop good rapport with interviewees and install confidence in them.

Some of the methods used to get realistic information were:

- To spend more time with the narrator
- Have a team of interviewers for facilitating the collection of stories

Community workers involved in reporting MSC stories should be trained as good communicators, because sometimes rural communities tend to hide facts for cultural reasons.

In the present context, the pilot phase of collecting and recording MSC stories, the approach has not always been sufficiently methodical. One can think of subdividing the process in steps such as 1) Selecting the most significant change, 2) Selecting the domain, etcetera. These are shortcomings in any project at the experimental stage, and should in time be corrected by making the process more professional. In any case, there should be a very good and live monitoring system to guide the process of collecting MSC stories to put them in the correct track regularly.

Conclusions and the way forward

Introducing the concept of MSC into community development is a meaningful and useful step, not least because the Sri Lankan community development organisations have been criticized and challenged from several corners. Some groups complain that civil organisations engaged in community development are only making patchwork, instead of trying to eradicate poverty from the root. Others complain that projects implemented by civil organisations cannot be sustainable due to an approach which they consider lacking in reality.

Both of these criticisms are based on quantitative measurements alone, because hitherto applied monitoring systems were based only on material and social indicators. These tools and indicators are simply not reflective enough to capture the spiritual and mental (attitudinal) changes created by project interventions. Now MSC stories can potentially provide the kind of information that will serve as a rebuttal of all these criticisms. As COMPAS coordinator Mr. Kahandawa mentioned, the MSC method is not an alternative or stand-alone tool to measure qualitative changes; it can be used as a complementary tool to enrich facts presented by the Logframe Approach.

Past experiences have clearly shown that MSC is a tool that can be used for understanding project impact, even during project implementation. Furthermore, MSC stories collected by experienced social developers can be used as baseline information at the planning level. Finally, this tool can be used at all levels of the project cycle, as a monitoring tool and indicator in micro-projects.

“Before coming to work with BRIT, I had the experience of working with two projects: PLAN Sri Lanka and the Integrated Rural Development Project. At the start of the IRDP we created awareness among farmers engaged in minor export crop cultivation to use chemicals to increase production. The greatest change working for BRIT, was the new knowledge on sustainable development. It really meant un-learning. Working with farmers to promote organic farming using natural resources is an empowering process. Because we can decide and work on our own instead waiting for others’ instruction” (BRIT field coordinator R.M. Ganawathi)

“FIOH always tried to change the mindset of the beneficiary because it is the bedrock where change is embossed. As such, MSC story collection is a useful and effective method to observe the real status of the project. This can be proven through MSC stories collected in our project area” (Sanath, FIOH field coordinator)

Annex

Abbreviations

BRIT	Biodiversity Research and Training centre, Sri Lankan partner NGO in the COMPAS program
COMPAS	Comparing and supporting endogenous development Program
DPRN	Development Policy Review Network
EVP	Ethnoveterinary Practice
FIOH	Future in our Hands, Sri Lankan partner NGO in the COMPAS program
LFA	Logical Framework Approach, also known as logframe approach
MSC	Most Significant Change stories, also: MSC stories <i>tool</i>
PM&E	Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation
PSO	Association of sixty Dutch development organisations focusing on capacity development
PROLINNOVA	Promoting Local Innovation in ecologically-oriented agriculture and Natural Resources Management
RUAF	Resource Centres on Urban Agriculture and Food Security

Well-being indicators for progress monitoring of the FIOH COMPAS field program (December 2009)

Well-being indicator	Output target 2010	Baseline 2007	Realization targets (per end 2009 December)	Achievements, outcomes beyond expectation, strengths	Gaps in target realization / weaknesses	Actions & capacities needed to achieve 2010 targets
1. All target farmers are able to meet their own traditional seed paddy requirement to 100%.	250 farmers produced their total seed paddy requirement	25 farmers produced 50 % of their paddy seed requirement	173 (69%) farmers have produced paddy seeds to meet their total requirement.	10 other farmers in other locations were able to obtain traditional paddy seeds from the farmers, who have already produced paddy seeds	Target achieved	1. Training on self seed production 2. Adaptability testing of varieties for different locations 3. Additional extension staff to be recruited
2. Extent of land belonging to target farmers converted to traditional rice cultivation increased from 12% to 50%.	50 % of the total land extent belonging to target farmers practice traditional methods*	12 % of the land extent belonging to target farmers is cultivated using traditional practices*	40 % of the extent belong to target farmers is cultivated using traditional practices	Non-targeted farmers are also attempting to follow traditional methods Grass-roots level officers are convinced on traditional cultivation methods	Farmers do not cultivate their entire extents due to water shortages	1. Strengthen the demonstration program 2. Promote the extension program 3. Establish information network and exposure visits
3. All target farmers are able to stop using chemicals in paddy farming completely (by 100%)	250 farmers cultivated paddy without using chemicals	225 farmers (90%) used chemicals in their paddy cultivation	173 (69%) target farmers have practiced chemical free paddy cultivation	Awareness creation made among all 250 target farmers on ecological farming. Some other farmers also gradually reducing chemical inputs like weedicide	Fertilizer subsidy of the government encouraged farmers to resort to chemical farming	1. Conduct training and awareness programs on the importance of chemical free farming 2. Establish service unit to create easy access to organic fertilizers
4. All the target farmers are able to reduce the cost of production of paddy farming by 25%	250 target farmers could reduce cost of production by 25 %	All the target farmers (250) cultivated paddy with high cost of production causing the cultivation to be non-profitable	173 farmers are able to reduce the cost of production by 15%	No	Traditional farming caused high labour demand due to non-availability of input materials nearby	1. Promote in-situ production of input materials 2. Establishment of service units to make input materials readily available

5. Target families are able to increase their food intake with naturally grown food by 30%.	250 families increased their food intake with naturally grown food by 30 %	Food intake of 250 target families with naturally grown food was 20%	173 farmers could increase the food intake with naturally grown food by 30 %	Most of non-target families took part in this programme and gave positive feedback	No	1. Strengthen the awareness creation program 2. Make plant materials available to farmers 3. Conserve and preserve food sources
6. All the target families involved in cattle farming are able to increase the use of ethno-veterinary practices to 50% of all practices	54 families increased the use of ethno veterinary practices to 50% of all practices	14 out of 54 families involved in cattle farming used ethno veterinary practices only 10% of the practices	32 families increased use of ethno-veterinary practices by 60%	Some ethno-veterinary practices are adopted by adjoining cattle farmers	Lack of practitioners found in the vicinity	1. Promote second generation of practitioners to learn ethno-veterinary practices 2. Update book on ethno veterinary experience documented in the past; Conduct capacity building programme for practitioners
6. All the target families involved in cattle farming are able to increase the use of ethno-veterinary practices to 50% of all practices	54 families increased the use of ethno veterinary practices to 50% of all practices	14 out of 54 families involved in cattle farming used ethno veterinary practices only 10% of the practices	32 families increased use of ethno-veterinary practices by 60%	Some ethno-veterinary practices are adopted by adjoining cattle farmers	Lack of practitioners found in the vicinity	1. Promote second generation of practitioners to learn ethno-veterinary practices 2. Update book on ethno veterinary experience documented in the past; Conduct capacity building programme for practitioners
7. All the target families are able to reduce external inputs in paddy farming by 50%	250 farmers reduced external inputs in paddy farming by 50%	250 families spent 46% of the total cost for external inputs.	173 farmers have reduced their external input cost by 20%	12 adjoining farmers attempted to reduce input cost by applying straw, green leaves and hand weeding etc.	Difficulty of convincing farmers to not use of inorganic fertilizer due to government policies on fertilizer subsidy	1. Strengthen extension service 2. Conduct training and awareness program on use of locally available inputs
8. Target families are able to cultivate with 100 % free of informal credit	70 farmers cultivated with 100 % free of informal credit	28% of farmers (70 farmers out of 250) are cultivating, receiving loan from informal credit providers at a rate of 10% interest per month.	All the farmers are able to receive loan from their CBOs at a rate of 20% interest per year	No	Difficulty of farming without credit.	Coordinate formal credit suppliers. Promote external inputs. Promote collective action.
9. All the target families engaged in spiritual development activities by performing Nakath, Kem and pooja of the agricultural and cattle farming	100%.	10% of the target farmers are practiced	173 (69%) of the target farmers are engaged in spiritual and cultural activities	Other farmers who cultivated same (yaya) field jointly offer pooja and start season by astrological time	No	Awareness programmes should be organized as a collective programme
10. All the target families received the membership of the community organization	Membership of the target families in community organization increased from 50% to 100%	50% of the target families are members of the community organization.	90% of the target farmers received membership of community organizations	No	Achieved as plan	Capacity building program

Source: COMPAS Sri Lanka Progress report, March 2010



Pooja ritual in a Sri Lankan rice field.

Before transplanting, the paddy field has to be protected from disaster through a ritual performed by the caretaker of the Buddhist temple.

For COMPAS network Sri Lanka, supporting organic rice cultivation includes traditional practices.