OUTCOME HARVESTING

Outcome harvesting is a monitoring and evaluation methodology used to identify, describe, verify and analyse the changes brought about through a development intervention. It is designed to collect evidence of change, and then work backwards to assess contribution to that change. It was partly inspired by Outcome Mapping, and the two are often seen as complementary methodologies.

Outcome harvesting is a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) methodology used to identify, describe, verify and analyse outcomes. In the context of outcome harvesting, an outcome is defined as *"a change in the behaviour, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organisation, or institution"* (Wilson-Grau and Britt 2013).

Outcome harvesting is designed to collect evidence of change (the 'outcomes') and then work backwards to assess whether or how an organisation, programme or project contributed to that change. This contrasts with the more traditional way of carrying out M&E, which is to start with activities and then attempt to trace changes forward through output, outcome and then impact levels.

As a methodology, outcome harvesting was partly inspired by Outcome Mapping, and the two are often seen as complementary. A key difference is that Outcome Mapping is designed to be used during planning as well as during (or after) implementation of a project or programme. By contrast, outcome harvesting is not designed to be used during planning. Unlike Outcome Mapping, however, it can be used even where there is no plan, or where reality has diverged so far from a plan that the plan has become meaningless.

Outcome harvesting can be used for ongoing monitoring throughout a project or programme, in order to produce real-time information on change. It can also be used within evaluations or impact assessments – during projects and programmes, at the end, or after they have been completed. Outcome harvesting can be used as a methodology on its own. However, like Outcome Mapping, it is often used in combination with other methodologies (Wilson-Grau 2015).

Outcome harvesting is designed to encourage the participation of different stakeholders in M&E. It is not designed just to extract information. Participation is described by the methodology's main developer as necessary for a successful outcome harvesting process and product (ibid).

The outcome harvesting methodology is described through a set of unique terms. These are contained in the box above, and are used throughout the remainder of this paper.

Terms Used in Outcome Harvesting

A **change agent** is an individual or organisation that influences an outcome. In outcome harvesting the change agent is often an organisation running a project or programme.

A **social actor** is an individual, group, community, organisation or institution that changes because of a change agent's intervention.

The **harvest user** is the stakeholder who needs the findings of an outcome harvest to make decisions or take action. This may include one or more people within the change agent organisation, or third parties such as a donor.

The **harvester** is the person or people responsible for managing the outcome harvest. The harvester is often an internal or external evaluator. The harvester leads the outcome harvesting process, and facilitates and supports participation within the process.

Source: Adapted from Wilson-Grau and Britt (2013)

When to use it

Outcome harvesting is considered most useful under three conditions (see Wilson-Grau 2015).

- It is appropriate when the focus is mostly on outcomes rather than activities or outputs. Outcome harvesting is designed to help assess what changed and why, in order to help understand change processes. It is not designed to assess whether or not activities were carried out according to plan.

- Outcome harvesting is designed for use in complex situations where the relationship between cause and effect is not fully understood and/or where many different actors influence change. In these contexts the desired changes, and the activities carried out in order to achieve them, are often highly unpredictable, and plans need to be constantly modified over time. Outcome harvesting is particularly useful in areas of work such as policy influencing, mobilisation, capacity development, empowerment and network development.

- Outcome harvesting is appropriate when the purpose of an M&E exercise is to learn about change in order to improve future performance. It is considered most useful when different stakeholders want not only to

identify change, but also to learn about how and why those changes were brought about.

How it works

(Note that this section is primarily based on a paper written by Wilson-Grau (2015) for the Better Evaluation website. More detailed information can be accessed from Wilson-Grau and Britt (2013)).

Outcome harvesting consists of six clear steps. These need to be customised according to the context. The steps are not always distinct, and feedback from one or more steps can cause a return to earlier steps. The steps are shown in the diagram below, and are described in more detail in this section.
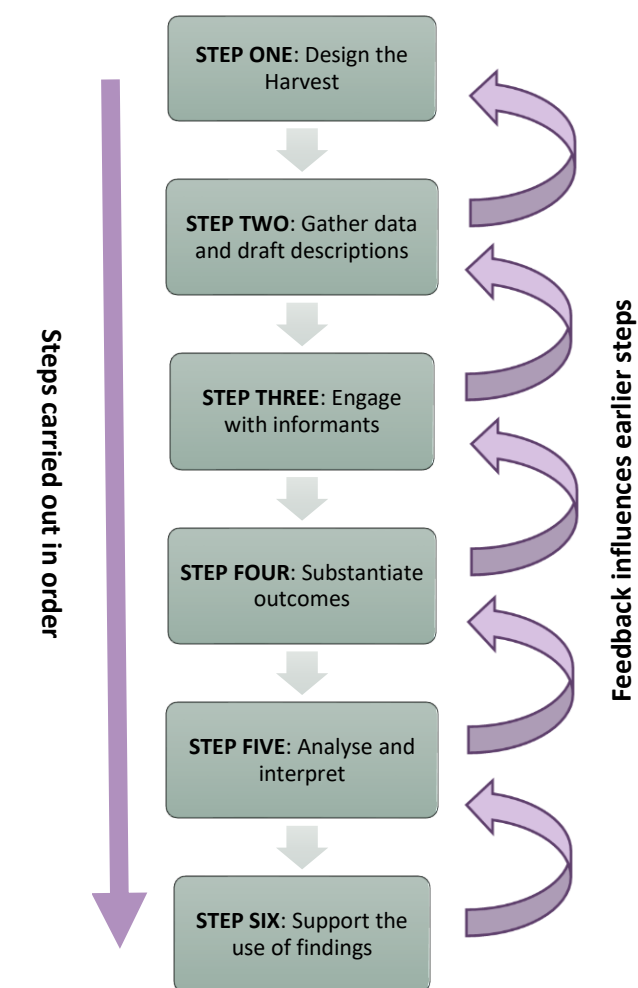
The first step in the process is to **design the outcome harvest**. In this step, harvesters and harvest users develop questions that guide the process. When doing this they pay particular attention to the needs of the harvest users.

Examples of possible questions include the following:

- what has been the collective effect of organisations on making a national governance regime more democratic?
- how have efforts influenced the governance regime?
- what does this mean for the programme's strategy?

Based on these questions, the harvester and harvest user decide what information will need to be collected, and from whom. They also outline what information will be included in the outcome descriptions (see step 2). At the very least this information should cover two things.

1. *The outcome*: Who has the change agent influenced to change, and what have they changed? When and where was it changed? What change can be seen in the social actor? What is being done differently that is significant?

2. *Contribution*: How (if at all) did the change agent contribute to this change? What did they do that influenced the change?

At this stage the harvester and harvester user may also decide how information will be grouped or classified when being analysed and interpreted (see step 5).

The next step is to **gather data and draft the descriptions**. This step is normally divided into two parts. The first part involves reviewing existing documentation (such as reports, evaluations, press releases, etc.) for evidence of potential outcomes to which the change agent may have contributed. Sometimes, primary data is gathered from different sources, including the social actors.

The second part of this step is to draft descriptions of each outcome, with any associated information agreed in step 1. The descriptions can be of different sizes and levels of detail, ranging from single sentences to multiple pages. As well as the change and contribution of the change agent, the descriptions might also include explanations of context, the contribution of others to the outcome, different perspectives, or any other information considered useful. Two examples of descriptions are shown in the boxes below (taken from Wilson-Grau and Britt, 2013).

Short Outcome Description

Outcome description: In 2009, The Palestinian Authority revitalizes an employment fund for qualified people living in Palestine.

Contribution: In 2007, a research report on the economic impact of unemployment in Palestine was released. The Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) coalition in Palestine followed up by coupling dialogue with the government and popular mobilisation – including the *"Stand Up and Be Counted"* campaign, which mobilised 1.2 million people in 2008. Working with the Ministry of Labour, the coalition helped secure multilateral funding and delineate management of the fund.

STEP THREE

The third step is to **engage with the informants** (the change agents) to review the draft outcome descriptions. Engagement may be through surveys, questionnaires or interviews. It is also common to carry out this step within a workshop setting.

At this stage, additional outcomes may be identified and written up into descriptions. Where necessary, harvesters ask change agents to supply additional information. The change agents might also consult with other individuals, either inside or outside their organisation, who can provide additional information on the outcomes. This sometimes involves interviewing the direct intended beneficiaries of a project or programme, or the targets of policy influencing work.

During this step the task of the harvester is to rigorously examine each outcome to ensure it is sufficiently specific and coherent. This includes checking the plausible links between the actions of the change agent and the outcome. Eventually, a revised set of outcome descriptions is developed.

STEP FOUR

The fourth step is to **substantiate the outcomes**. During this step the harvester and harvest users review the outcome descriptions, and select a sample to verify them. The reason for this is to increase the accuracy and credibility of the findings. To verify the descriptions, the harvester may interview one or more individuals who are independent of, but know about, the outcomes and the change interventions. Sometimes these interviews can lead to better understanding of the outcomes and the contribution of the change agent.

STEP FIVE

The fifth step is to **analyse and interpret the outcomes**. In this step the harvester groups or categorises all the outcomes (if necessary using the classifications designed in step 1). This can be carried out as a participatory exercise with the change agents. If there are a limited number of outcomes the classification can largely be done by hand. However, for larger outcome harvests, or those classified under multidimensional criteria, a database might be required.

Once the outcome descriptions have been categorised, the harvester interprets the information and attempts to answer the harvesting questions. Outcome harvesting does not recommend any particular method for analysing the information, and normal methods of qualitative analysis can be used.

STEP SIX

The final step is to **support the use of the findings**. During this step the harvester holds discussions with the harvest users, based on the analysis and interpretation of the outcomes. The harvester may suggest specific courses of action, based on the findings. However, it is recognised that evidence-based analysis of the kind produced through outcome harvesting is only one contributor to decision-making. There will often be other political, legal, financial or ethical positions to be considered.

Strengths and weaknesses

As stated earlier, outcome harvesting is most useful in complex settings, where the focus is on assessing change and learning. It is particularly effective at addressing unintended outcomes, as it treats all outcomes equally, rather than concentrating primarily on planned change. Because of this, outcome harvesting is better than most M&E methodologies at dealing with both intended and unintended consequences.

In outcome harvesting, outcomes are verified through discussions with both internal and external stakeholders. This helps to improve the quality of data collection, and ensures that outcomes are not simply based on self-reporting by an implementing agency. Outcome harvesting is one of a limited number of qualitative M&E methodologies that promote rigour in the collection, analysis and reporting of multiple cases of change.

One great strength of outcome harvesting is that it does not necessarily require plans or M&E frameworks to have been developed from the start of a project or programme. It can therefore be used even where there is no plan or theory of change, or when a theory of change is only partially formed.

Along with other qualitative M&E tools that start by assessing change and then working backwards (e.g. Most Significant Change and contribution analysis) outcome harvesting can be carried out even if projects or programmes have not been properly monitored or evaluated over their lifetime.

However, outcome harvesting also has some limitations.

- Outcomes are only captured if they have already been described in documentation, or if the change agent is aware of them. This might mean a bias towards outcomes that are easy to identify, and away from those that are more difficult to measure.

- Outcome harvesting may be less useful if a development agency wants to know whether or how far specific objectives were achieved. Outcome harvesting tends to work with multiple outcomes, and does not include guidelines for investigating major, planned changes in-depth.

- Developing and describing outcomes is very difficult for some CSO staff, particularly if not working in their first language. It can take a lot of time and skill to develop high-quality outcome descriptions, and frequently outside assistance is required.

- Outcome harvesting can be very data-intensive. For example, when Oxfam Novib used the method as part of an evaluation of its global programme between 2005 and 2008, nearly 200 outcomes were recorded. These were captured in a report of around 400 pages.

- Outcome harvesting is described as a participatory methodology, and it is certainly designed to involve participants such as project and programme staff. It is less clear how wider stakeholders (such as social actors) should participate, and there is a danger that data collection can end up being extractive.

Further reading and resources

Other papers in this section of the M&E Universe deal with Outcome Mapping, and other qualitative data methodologies that start by assessing change and then working backwards to identify contribution.

▶ Outcome Mapping

▶ Most significant change

▶ Process tracing

▶ Contribution analysis

Outcome harvesting is a relatively new methodology, and little has yet been written about it to-date, although many NGOs are beginning to experiment with it. The two main sources for this paper are included in the references below. Two examples of practical applications of outcome harvesting can be found in the following papers, both available through the Better Evaluation website:

➢ Evaluation of Oxfam Novib's Global Programme 2005-2008 for Aim 1 and 4. GloPro's Strategic Positioning and Counterparts' Outcomes. by Juliette Majot, Wolfgang Richert and Ricardo Wilson-Grau, March 2010.
➢ Retrospective 'Outcome Harvesting': Generating robust insights about a global voluntary environmental network. By Kornelia Rassmann, Richard Smith, John Mauremootoo and Ricardo Wilson-Grau.

A short description of how Christian Aid Ireland has approached outcome harvesting within an adaptive management context can be found on page 14 of the publication *"Learning to make a difference: Christian Aid Ireland's adaptive programme management in governance, gender, peace building and human rights"*, by David Booth with Karol Balfe, Róisín Gallagher, Gráinne Kilcullen, Sarah O'Boyle and Alix Tiernan. This is available from https://www.christianaid.ie/sites/default/files/2018-09/christian-aid-report-learning-to-make-a-difference.pdf.

References

- Wilson-Grau, R (2015). *Outcome Harvesting. Better Evaluation.* Retrieved from http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting
- Wilson-Grau, R and Britt, H (2013). *Outcome Harvesting*. Ford Foundation, November 2013.

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