

Outcome harvesting

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Abstract

This approach is developed by Wilson-Grau, R and Britt, H (2013) and can be used for both monitoring and evaluation. The approach is highly participative which requires active participation from those closest to action. It involves six steps and can be customized to suit the user demands. The learnings from outcome harvesting can be a contributor to guide the decision making in addition to other factors (political, legal, financial and ethical considerations).

Background

A project/program intervention bring changes which could be in the form of outputs or outcomes. While outputs are immediate results which give an idea about the efficiency of the intervention, outcomes take time to occur and determine the effectiveness of the intervention. For example, in a capacity building intervention, the outputs are the trainings provided while the outcomes are the changes in the attitudes of the target stakeholders. Further, outcomes can be defined as changes in the behavior, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or an institution.

Even though many social interventions are informed by logic models which rely on linear cause-and-effect theories of change, the change efforts are typically characterized by a. emergent and adaptive unpredictable strategies b. efforts from multiple diverse stakeholders and c. complex systems, where multiple variables interact. Because of this complexity, traditional assessments of cause and effect (to measure the effect of interventions) becomes infeasible in many of these instances. This is particularly true for complex program contexts such as those of advocacy/campaigns/policy work interventions. For eg, in an advocacy intervention context, the pathways to the success are largely unpredictable and predefined objectives and theories of change need to be modified responding to the context changes. Hence, it becomes important to select an evaluation approach that adequately capture change influenced by these complex interventions as the traditional prospective approach of evaluating against predetermined outcome fail to provide desired results.

Outcome harvesting

Outcome harvesting is one such evaluation approach which helps in navigating the complexities in evaluating interventions that are often subjected to context changes over the intervention period. Unlike the traditional way of carrying out M&E, which is to start with activities and then trace changes forward through output, outcome and impact levels, outcome harvesting is retrospective which starts with harvesting outcomes at the start.

Outcome harvesting is an evaluation approach used in complex interventions which do not adhere to traditional logic models for outcome-based learning.



Outcome harvesting is a participatory evaluation methodology that was developed by Wilson-Grau, R and Britt, H (2013) and can be used for both monitoring and evaluation. While used as a monitoring tool, outcome harvesting can provide real time information on change for ongoing monitoring throughout a project/program, and when used for evaluation, the approach can be used for ongoing developmental, mid-term formative and end-term summative evaluations. It can be combined with other methods such as contribution analysis or can be used as a stand-alone comprehensive evaluation approach. Outcome Harvesting is especially useful when the aim is to understand how individual outcomes contribute to broader system-wide changes.

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Terms Used in Outcome harvesting

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The following are the terms introduced by Wilson-Grau, R and Britt, H (2013) to describe the outcome harvesting

Change agent: Individual or organization that influences an outcome.

Social actor / boundary partner: Individual, group, community, organization, or institution that changes in part because of a change agent intervention.

Harvest user: The individual(s) who require the findings of an Outcome Harvest to make decisions or take action. This may be one or more people within the change agent organization or third parties such as a donor.

Harvester: Person responsible for managing the Outcome Harvest.

Steps involved in Outcome harvesting

By design, the objective of outcome harvesting is not only to extract information but to also encourage participation of different stakeholders in M&E.

The six steps introduced by Wilson-Grau, R and Britt, H (2013) can be customized based on the context and the needs of the primary users. The steps are more of guiding principles and given as below

1. Design the harvest
2. Gather data and draft outcome descriptions
3. Engage change agents in formulating outcome descriptions
4. Substantiate
5. Analyse, interpret
6. Support use of findings



1. Design the outcome harvest

Generally, the evaluation is commissioned by organizations (harvest user) with an objective to learn and plan its future course of actions. Hence, the focus on design phase should attempt to get clarification on what the harvest user needs to know. Since the outcome harvesting methodology depends on user needs, it is also imperative to understand the harvest user intention on how they want to use the information. This will help in defining the harvest processes and guide in harvesting the findings. One key milestone in the design phase is the agreement between the harvest and harvesters on what needs to be known as the intervention can result in numerous things and agreeing on key focus areas is necessary to move ahead. The agreement is usually followed with drafting useful, actionable questions to guide the harvest.

An example for agreement between harvest user and harvester at the design phase

In Iraq, Mercy Corps adapted Outcome harvesting approach to establish the most significant outcomes achieved through their work with consortium partners on BPCS program. The *evaluation questions* agreed for the evaluation considering what could practically be achieved within the time available are:

1. To what extent have BPCS partners (change agents) contributed to increased civic participation?
2. To what extent have BPCS partners contributed to more participatory government processes?
3. What do the outcomes of BPCS imply for how governance strengthening programs in societies in transition should be designed?

Source: Outcome Harvesting Final Report, Broad Participation Through Civil Society, Iraq (2015)

2. Gather data and draft outcome descriptions

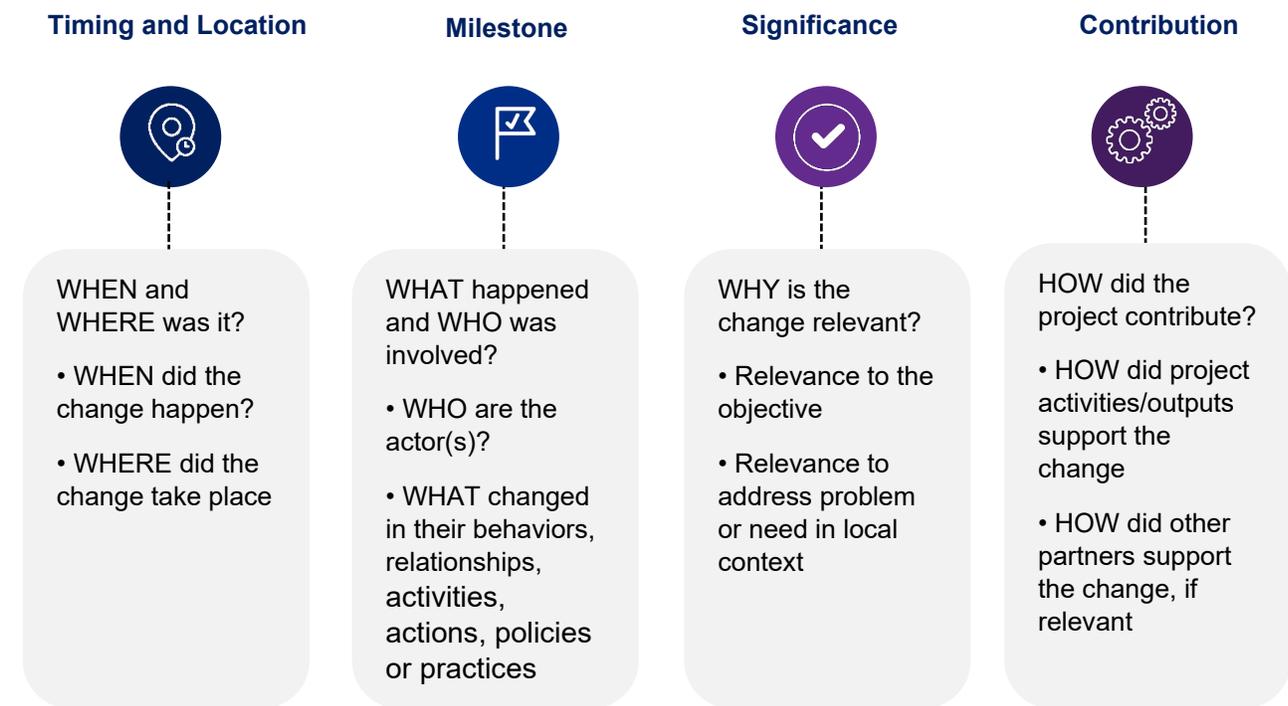
This step is led by the harvester (evaluator) and normally divided into two parts – a. Gather data b. draft outcome descriptions.

The evaluator extracts information about changes that have occurred in social actors and how the change agent contributed to these changes. Usually, the information is extracted from reviewing existing documentation such as reports, proposal, evaluation studies, press releases, blogs, pictures, conference materials, SWOT analysis and other documents. At places, where there are little documents available to gather information for outcomes, organizations are invited to list outcomes they helped contribute to.

The second part of this step involves evaluators drafting descriptions of each outcome. Care is taken to ensure that the outcomes are drafted in associated to information agreed in step 1 by grouping/clustering the outcomes in alignment to the evaluation questions. There is no certain thumb rule to drafting descriptions - which can be of different sizes and levels of detail, ranging from single sentences to multiple pages. However, it is usually a good practice to include explanations of context, the contribution of others to the outcome, different perspectives, or any other information considered useful in the description in addition to describing the change and contribution of the change agent. The outcome descriptions shall also contain questions for review and clarification by the change agent.



Sample template to draft outcome description (adapted from THE WORLD BANK Outcome based learning field guide).



Sample outcome description

A. Outcome: In 2010, the Yem district court of Ethiopia sentenced to 16 years imprisonment an offender who raped a nine-year-old girl.

B. Contribution: In 2009, ActionAid Ethiopia conducted a series of training workshops for local law enforcers including the police, prosecutors and judges from the Yem district.

C. Significance: This was the first time in the Yem district that a rapist of a minor received a multi-year jail sentence.

Source: Outcome Harvesting demo workshop (2015); retrieved from <https://www.theimprovetgroup.com/sites/default/files/Outcome%20Harvesting%20Workshop%202015.pdf>

3. Engaging change agents in formulating outcome description

The outcome harvesting is highly participatory in true sense as this step necessitates active participation from those change agents who are closest to the action. They are those who best know what has been achieved and will be motivated to share their achievements.



Usually the step involves evaluators (harvesters) holding discussions with change agents (informants) introducing outcome harvesting approach to the change agents and nudging them to reflect on the behavioral changes that could have happened through the intervention. They will then be tasked with the review of the draft outcomes, clarify and determine the other outcomes which have not been identified in the previous step.

During the discussions, the evaluator may need to go back and forth with the change agents in order to develop credible enough outcomes. The evaluator is advised to examine that the generated outcomes through discussions are

- i. Specific and coherent
- ii. Plausible relation exists between the outcome and contribution
- iii. Acceptable rational supporting the significance

The following table can be used during discussions with change agents, as a guidance to populate the outcome descriptions across different change agents.

Timeframe	Month, Year	Month, Year	Month, Year
Social actor (Name the change agent)	OUTCOME		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did the actor do, where? • Significance to objective • Problem addressed • Contribution of initiative 		
Social actor			
Social actor			
Social actor			

Source: THE WORLD BANK Outcome-Based Learning field Guide

4. Substantiate

The next step involves the harvester obtaining the views of independent individuals knowledgeable about the outcomes and how they are achieved. This is done with an objective to validate and enhance the credibility of the findings. Given that substantiation takes time, the harvester and harvest user agree to substantiate a subset of the outcomes described in the previous step. Usually, 20% of the outcomes are selected on mutual agreement basis for substantiation. One may choose to select outcomes which are mix of the following for substantiation

- i. True outcomes: Key behavioral, institutional or policy change
- ii. Pivotal outcomes: Affected follow up decisions in major ways
- iii. Setback outcomes: Unintended, negative or reflect an expected outcome that did not occur
- iv. Most recent outcomes in a causal series
- v. Potential to strengthen understanding of program contribution



The substantiation involves verification of outcome and agreement on significance of the outcome. While verification of the outcome statement is likely to be the least controversial part of the substantiation, whereas agreement on significance of the outcome, and/or the extent to which the program contributed might be subject to more variation depending on stakeholders' roles, interests and views.

Sample format to administer substantiation (adopted from Wilson-Grau, R and Britt, H (2013). Outcome Harvesting. Ford Foundation, November 2013)

Present the outcome descriptions to one or more credible (independent, knowledgeable) person(s) and ask them to go on record with their opinion:

- a. To what degree are you in agreement with the description of the outcome?
 1. Fully agree Partially agree Disagree
 2. I do not feel qualified to answer (please state why)
 3. Comments (optional):
- b. To what degree are you in agreement with the description of project's contribution?
 - a. Fully agree Partially agree Disagree
 - b. I do not feel qualified to answer (please state why)
 - c. Comments (optional):
- c. How much do you agree with the description of the significance of the outcome?
 - a. Fully agree Partially agree Disagree
 - b. I do not feel qualified to answer (please state why)
 - c. Comments (optional):

5. Analyse, Interpret

Analysing and Interpreting the outcomes will be the next step once the outcome descriptions are finalized and substantiated. It is a good practice for the harvester to organize (group/categorise) the outcomes basis the evaluation questions identified in Step 1. This may be achieved in discussions with harvest user.



Useful template to categorise the outcomes (adopted from Outcome Harvesting Evaluation ActionAid Denmark Tax Justice Program Evaluation Report, Goele Scheers Consultancy, 2017)

Classification Field	Category	Outcome
Change level	Local	
	National	
	Regional	
	Global	
Programme Focus	XXXX	
	YYYYY	
Significance level	Major	
	Important	
	Minor	

5.1. Analyse

The analysis phase involves the identification of patterns and processes among the cluster of outcomes identified in the previous steps and often focuses on theories of change. The harvester can choose to analyse outcome in one of the following three levels

- i. For each outcome: Shall be used when the descriptions of outcome include lengthy text
- ii. Outcomes of a single agent: To understand how the outcomes add up and are the processes of change revealed.
- iii. Overarching program with multiple change agents: To understand how the outcomes of several agents combine synergistically to create broader and deeper changes.

Various techniques (such as stories, charts, visualizations) may be employed to facilitate analysis of multiple outcomes.

5.2. Interpret

While the harvester will be in a position to provide an evidence based answer to the question of WHAT has been achieved during analysis phase, the interpretation of outcomes will be helpful to answer the questions of SO WHAT? Various interpretation tools and approaches shall be employed for interpretation

The interpretation is largely guided by the utility (how findings will be used?). The interpretive lens can either exclusively focus on harvest user goals/ visions/ strategies or can include harvester perspective as well.



Some useful visualizations to help in the interpreting outcomes are

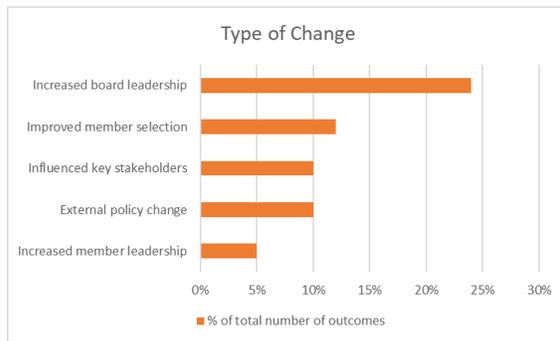


Figure 1: Type of change appearing in outcomes (%)

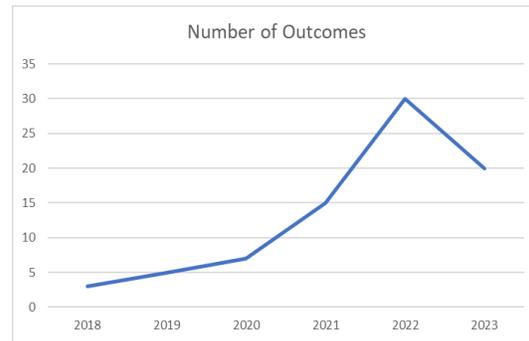


Figure 2: Number of outcomes harvested per year

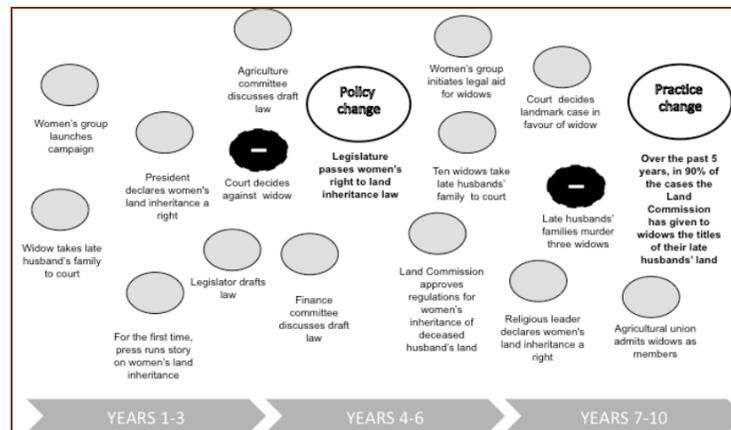


Figure 3: Example of Change Analysis: Women's Inheritance Rights in an African country

Figure 1 & 2: Adopted from Outcome Harvesting demo workshop (2015); retrieved from <https://www.theimprovetgroup.com/sites/default/files/Outcome%20Harvesting%20Workshop%202015.pdf>

Figure 3: Source: Wilson-Grau, R and Britt, H (2013). Outcome Harvesting. Ford Foundation, November 2013.

6. Support Use of Findings

The earlier steps were helpful in addressing questions such as WHAT was achieved?, how was it achieved? and SO WHAT? through outcome descriptions, substantiation, analysis and interpretation. The answers to the questions identified in the first step is the outcome harvesting evaluation document which can be prepared in the form of written reports or presentations.

The key next step involved using the findings from outcome harvesting to support the harvest user. The harvester is best placed to draw actionable findings and suggest future course of actions. Though these suggestions are only one contributor to the harvest user decision making as he/she/they need to consider including multiple perspectives such those of political, legal, financial and ethical factors in addition to actionable findings suggested by the harvester.

The harvester can choose to share the actionable findings through a short group discussions/ team reflection/ case study approach.

Diagrammatic representation of outcome harvesting six step processes

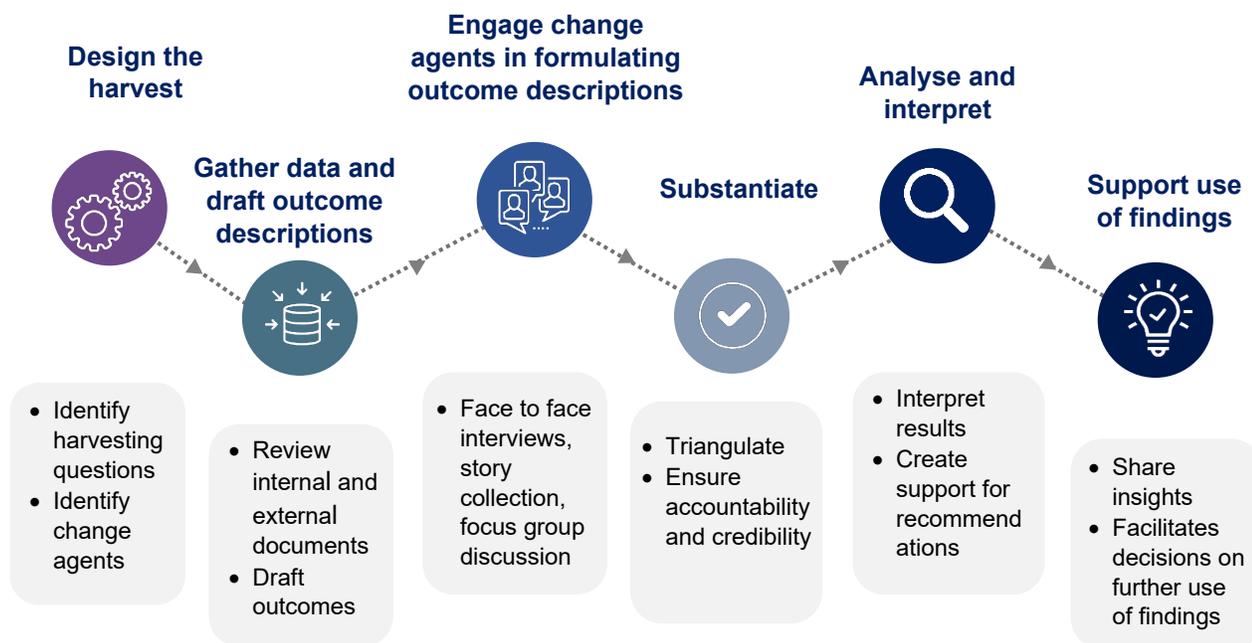


Figure 4: Six step process of Outcome Harvesting

Key points need to be considered in administering outcome harvesting

- a. Important to influence those who are close to implementation

Outcome harvesting is participatory in true sense because it requires those close to the action to brief and explain about the outcomes that have been achieved and how they been achieved. Without those who are close to the implementation appreciating the understanding of Outcome harvesting, it is difficult to administer the evaluation approach.

- b. Utility depends on its adaptation

The harvesting question drives the entire outcome harvesting processes. Hence, it is critical to frame the right questions and it is suggested that framing of these questions depend on how the findings will be utilized.

For example, in an capacity building intervention, if the focus of using the findings are to design a follow up on program, it would be wise to formulate harvesting questions that capture outcomes detailing out the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention of concern. Whereas, in the same intervention, if the focus is to see how the intervention benefitted certain set of community, it would be wise to formulate questions relevant to that aspect.



c. Timing is important

While outputs are immediate results, Outcomes take time to reflect, often at times take much longer than project time for outcomes to appear. On the other hand, outcome harvesting is highly participatory and hence, leaving the harvest too long after an intervention risks sources forgetting the outcomes or lack motivation to participate in harvesting the outcomes. Hence, choosing an appropriate time for the harvesting is prime important.

Conclusion

Outcome harvesting can be a powerful approach for those interventions whose success depends on influencing policies, practices, actions and relationships such as those of advocacy interventions especially in documenting and learning about the achievements of interventions. It is a six step process which requires high participation from those who are close to the action and able to create actionable insights based on the needs of the users. The findings will be a mix of quantitative data (number of outcomes) and qualitative (describing the outcomes, change agent contribution, and other important outcome dimensions).

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