

Outcome Harvesting

for monitoring and learning of social change

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Outcome Harvesting: the basics

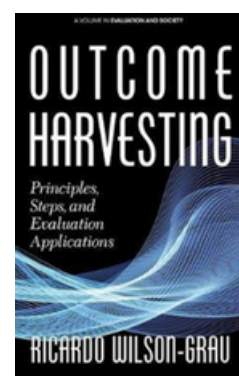
Outcome Harvesting is a method that enables evaluators or projects to identify, formulate, verify, and make sense of outcomes of their initiatives. The method was inspired by the definition of outcome in Outcome Mapping: a change in the behaviour, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organisation, or institution (that are within the sphere of your influence).

Using Outcome Harvesting, the evaluator or harvester gleans information from reports, harvest workshop and personal interviews, and other sources to document how a given programme or initiative has contributed to outcomes. These outcomes can be positive or negative, intended or unintended, but there should be a connection between the initiative and the outcomes, and it should be verifiable.

Outcome Harvesting does not measure progress towards predetermined outcomes or objectives, but rather collects evidence of what has been achieved, and works backward to determine whether and how the project or intervention contributed to the change. In this sense, it is analogous to sciences such as forensics, anthropology, or geology, which interpret events or contributing factors that led to a particular outcome or result by collecting evidence and answering specific questions. An outcome description typically consists of an outcome statement (description of change), a significance statement and a contribution statement (how the project contributed).

Information about the outcomes are collected, or harvested, from the individuals or implementation organisation(s) whose actions influenced the outcome(s) as well as from the key context actors/stakeholders or project partners. The harvested information goes through a winnowing process during which it is validated or substantiated. The substantiated information is then analysed and interpreted at the level of individual outcomes or groups of outcomes that contribute to mission, goals or strategies and the resultant outcome descriptions are used to answer the monitoring, evaluation or research questions.

Outcome Harvesting is a participatory monitoring and evaluation methodology to identify, analyse and learn from outcomes, i.e. changes that a programme influences/produces. It was developed by international evaluators Ricardo Wilson-Grau and his colleagues.



Why choose for Outcome Harvesting?

In conventional monitoring and evaluation, project process/performance is usually measured against pre-defined indicators. In **complex environments** – the environments that most development programmes are operating in - however, objectives and the paths to achieve them are largely unpredictable and **relations between causes and effects are not necessarily linear or clear**.

On top of that, the situations that development programmes are intervening in, are usually characterised by the **involvement of a range of different stakeholders** that do not necessarily agree on the problem or the solution of the problem, (so-called 'wicked' or complex problems) or on what a successful change is and what not.

Outcome Harvesting focuses on collecting evidence of a) outcomes (who has changed what policy/practice), irrespective of whether the outcome was planned or not, and b) how the intervention contributed to this change. Next to that Outcome Harvesting focuses on c) the significance (so what?) and meaning of the outcomes for various groups of stakeholders.

The method is very much geared towards **learning about 'what works, and what does not, for whom, why and where'** and adjusting the program, while at the same time providing evidence of outcomes and contribution of the program.

The evidence is harvested both real time (when change is happening) and afterwards. The outcome(s) can be positive or negative (depending on whose view counts), intended or unintended, direct or indirect.

What is an outcome?

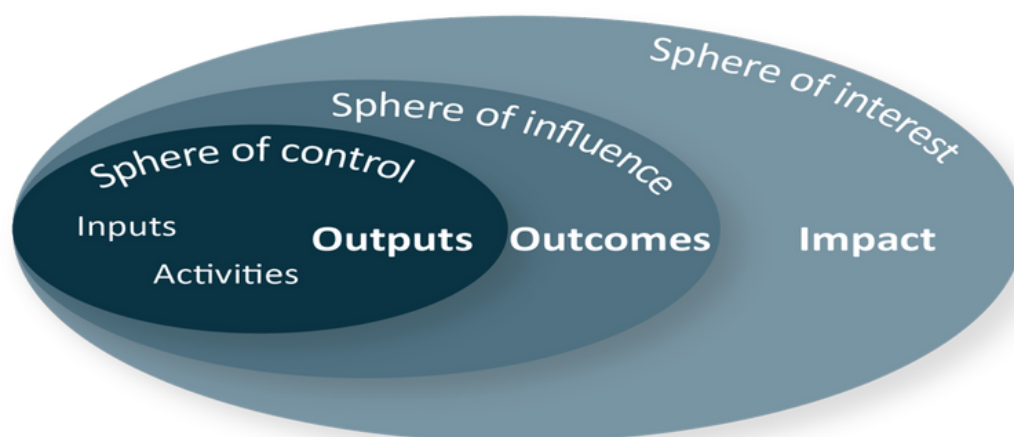
Outcome Harvesting focuses on outcomes. In the Outcome Harvesting method an outcome is an **observable** and **significant** change in a **social actor** that has been **influenced by an implementing organisation (the change agent)** through its actions, interventions and strategies.

- Outcomes are **changes in behaviour, policies, and practices**. *For example: a company shifting its production processes to sustainable alternatives (change in practice) or a government ministry developing a gender and environment action plan (change in policy).*
- The change takes place in a **societal actor**, i.e. the focus is not on how the implementing organisation has changed, but on how actors in the society (a governmental body, companies and/or communities) have changed their practices. *For example: the minister of Environment changes a policy in such a way that a social and environmental assessment is compulsory in preparation of large infrastructural interventions. Or: A company decides to change its mining practices; a fishing community adopts sustainable fishing practices; a network of partners includes women organisations.*

- The change has to be **observable** which implies that the change is visible and can be validated by external people or evidence. *For example: a change in awareness in citizens after an urban environmental sensitisation workshop is not observable, but if the citizens gather neighbours and start an urban farm, this is a concrete observable change in behaviour.*
- The change has to be **significant, important**. An outcome is significant or important when it represents a major difference with previous practice or is likely to have larger uptake, or a triggering effect, spin-off etc.

Other key concepts of Outcome Harvesting

- **Outcome Harvesting works backwards:** it starts with identifying what has changed, and then determines if and how an intervention/project contributed to the change.
- **The sphere of influence:** The outcomes that are of interest to Outcome Harvesting take place in the 'sphere of influence' of the implementing organisation, i.e. the outcomes to which the implementing organisation contributed.



- **Outcome Harvesting captures unintended and negative changes:** Besides the intended and positive changes, Outcome Harvesting also stimulates you to look at unintended and negative changes that may be observed. This enriches the learning process and may make you think of future interventions that circumvent negative changes, or of using those interventions that resulted in unexpected positive changes in the plan of next year. *For example, as a negative, unexpected result of an environmental protection campaign aimed at exposing violations by a company in order to prepare for legal action, the company reviews its internal procedures so that it will be much more difficult to win a legal case. The company continues with the violations. Or, a community has shifted its practices, seemingly to be more environmentally sustainable, but has inadvertently increased women's work burden.*

The six steps of Outcome Harvesting for monitoring and learning

✓ Design the outcome harvest

The individuals that document outcomes/changes (called harvesters) start by planning the harvesting: Who will be engaged? Where? When? Where to find information? Who to interview?

✓ Gather data and draft outcome descriptions

The harvesters collect data and evidence to identify changes, and formulates outcome descriptions, using different data sources and methods.

✓ Verify outcome descriptions

To assure quality of outcome descriptions, the harvesters refine the outcome descriptions through checking for consistency, correctness and completeness with his/her peers and others.

✓ Substantiate the outcome descriptions

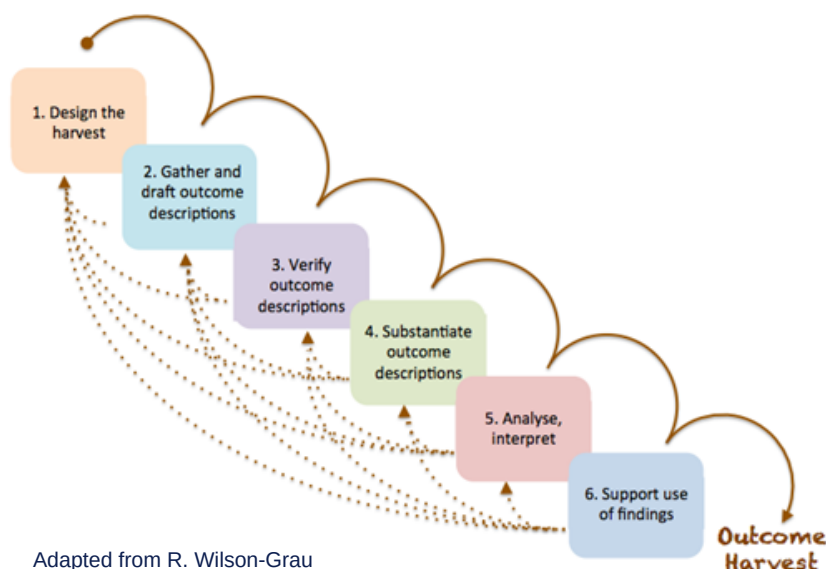
Informants knowledgeable about the outcome but external to/independent of the partner organisation are invited to provide feedback to (a sample of) the outcome descriptions. This will increase credibility and accuracy of the changes.

✓ Analyse and interpret the outcome descriptions

The harvesters and colleagues jointly identify and understand patterns, processes and trends of change among (clusters) of outcome descriptions.

✓ Support the use of findings

The last step of the Outcome Harvesting approach is focused on the interpretation of the analysis for future practice/decision making in and planning of the programme. How can findings be put to action? What are the lessons learned? Should we adjust our Theory of Change?



Adapted from R. Wilson-Grau

Outcome descriptions are at the heart of the Outcome Harvesting process. These are short 'stories' that capture an example of an observable change in a social actor.

About Voices That Count



Voices That Count is a collaborative network of experts and practitioners who use narrative approaches to understand complex realities within organisations or projects. Through our work we generate actionable insights and stimulate collaboration for social impact.

In our work, we use and mix different methodologies which always take the stories and experiences of people as a starting point. Outcome Harvesting is one of these methodologies.

Our experts and practitioners have years of experience in setting up Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning systems, communication and guiding participatory processes.



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