



Use of Outcome Harvesting

for Monitoring and Evaluation

Our Experiences and Lessons Learned

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Introduction

For the longest time, programs in lobby and advocacy have been challenged in monitoring complex systemic changes and OH is highly suitable in such areas. In 2015 Hivos adopted to use Outcome Harvesting (OH) as a monitoring approach for the Dialogue and Dissent (D&D) Citizen Agency Consortium Strategic Partnership program, inspired by its use in the Dutch Co-Financing System (MFS II) evaluation. This methodology has been used as a monitoring approach to support learning and reflection as well as inform evaluation and support donor reporting.

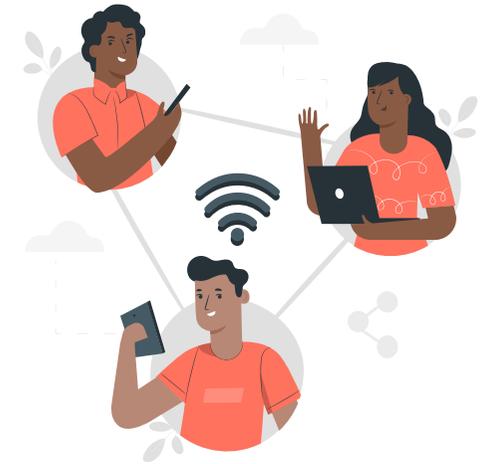


What is Outcome Harvesting?

Outcome Harvesting (OH) is a method that enables evaluators, grant makers, and managers to identify, formulate, verify, and make sense of outcomes. The method was inspired by the definition of outcome as a change in the behavior, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or institution. Outcomes can be positive or negative, intended or unintended, but the connection between the initiative and the outcomes should be verifiable. Outcome Harvesting can be used for both monitoring (provide real-time information about achievements) and evaluation (applies evaluative thinking by asking evaluative questions, applying evaluation logic, and gathering and reporting evaluative data throughout the process (Ricardo & Heather 2013)). Therefore, this methodology has the potential to serve multiple purposes including reporting, learning, and improving programme quality.

The Experience

Using OH requires, among other skills, a basic conceptual understanding of the basic Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) aspects. In addition, there is need to have a clear understanding on how to formulate an outcome as well as the ability to write clearly and concisely. This, therefore, was an indication that some level of training was paramount for those using OH for the first time and regular follow up coaching and mentoring for the harvesters so that they were able adapt to their roles in the process. Hivos OH coordinators were selected depending on the role they played in the organization and therefore the skewness towards those with Design, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (DMEL) roles and responsibilities. In 2017, Trainer of Trainers (ToT) training organized in the Hague, Netherlands was provided to this team by the late Ricardo Wilson-Grau and Wolfgang Richert.¹ The expectation of this team was to cascade the acquired skills in their respective regions to Hivos staff as well as partners.



The approach

We used a mix of face-to-face and virtual approaches to harvest outcomes. Initially, we began with face-to-face training of the harvesters on the OH methodology, after which they went back to their organizations. A reporting template was shared with the partners and were expected to remotely harvest the outcomes with the 'ping-pong' or review process happening with the coordinators (either through email exchanges, Skype or telephone).

¹ Part of the team who developed Outcome Harvesting methodology

However, this approach proved to be lengthy and quite frustrating to both the harvesters and coordinators. It gave birth to a 'pressure cooker' approach of using write shops which were quite effective. Preceding the write shop date, partners and program staff would draft outcomes which would then be discussed, revised (if need be) and finalized during the write shops. Each participant was given a chance to share the draft outcomes and the rest of the participants offered feedback on how to strengthen them. This brought out the concept of collaborative and peer-to-peer learning which overtime brought unique strengths of each partner while strengthening program work through team work, cooperation and combined effort. An additional aspect to the write shops was a session on basic M&E aspects which helped in clarifying what OH focuses on. With the new COVID-19 realities, the face-to-face write shops got replaced with virtual write shops but the design remained intact.

Harvesting the Outcomes

When we began, the plan was to have two cycles each year (biannually) dedicated to OH focused largely on the obligatory donor reporting. This fell under Step one (Design of the Outcome Harvest). The harvests were also planned

during annual reflection or planning meetings to inform reflection. However, as time went by, we aspired to have real time (harvest as the outcome unfolds) avoiding the challenges that comes with harvesters trying to recall the outcomes that have unfolded after a period of time. We realized, with more frequent harvesting it was easier and quicker to recall information and less chance of forgetting important outcomes. Although the writeshops continued to happen biannually, we encouraged partners to report outcomes quarterly accompanying the quarterly reports. This meant that the ping-pong and review of outcomes continued throughout the program cycle. After the training on OH, harvesters were required to take a journey back to the memory lane seeking information about changes that had occurred among social actors that they had influenced and how the change agent contributed to those changes. The harvesters would write preliminary outcome descriptions, which would open up the ping-pong or review process.

Reviewing of the outcomes

The process of reviewing outcomes called for a formally designed format between OH coordinators and harvesters to ensure quality outcomes were harvested and reported. We adopted a three-step approach

OH Concepts



where regional hubs OH coordinators engaged in a ping-pong process with harvesters from countries within their region. The final draft was shared with OH coordinator (not based in the region) for a final quality check and approval for further sharing with the donors. The three-step approach ensured that the outcomes were of high quality and credible enough. The ping-pong process is essential since the first drafts are usually unclear requiring some bit of review. This process also provided more capacity in terms of skills and knowledge for both the coordinators and harvesters



in terms of OH methodology.

Substantiation

This is the process where views of independent individuals, knowledgeable about the outcome(s) are sought to validate and enhance credibility of outcomes. Closely linked to this process is the review

of supporting documents (both for the outcome statement as well as for the contribution aspect). In the third year of program implementation, a sample of outcomes were selected to go through the substantiation process based on the most significant in each country context, relevance to Theory of Change (ToC) and their importance to the program objectives. The design was to have at least 2-3 substantiators for each selected outcome. Through the support of regional OH coordinators, harvesters were approached with the requests of names and contacts of persons who would confirm the accuracy of the outcomes. One of the challenges

that faced this process was the approach that was adopted to reach the substantiators through emails. This meant that for ordinary citizens or beneficiaries who had no access to emails got challenged. In addition, cultural and language differences were factors that also determined the practicability of the process. For a country such as Tanzania for example, there was a need to find an English to Kiswahili translator. The other challenge we encountered was failure to reach or track down the harvesters (and even substantiators) who had moved on from organizations they were working for by the time the outcome was harvested.

Starting workshops with a brainstorming phase, where harvesters draft outcomes help in identifying the real outcome rather than the back and forth that comes when harvesters are remotely harvesting the outcomes.



Analysis and use of harvested outcomes

After harvesting the outcomes, there is always a need to analyze, interpret and make sense of them. This definitely provides evidence-based answers to the useful harvesting questions. In all the four programs² this process was done annually during the team review meetings where the assessment of outcomes guided the review of ToC.

² Women@Work; Sustainable Diets for All; Open Contracting and Green and Inclusive Energy Programs

There was more participation beyond the DMEL teams (OH coordinators) to include program implementers as well as partners and other stakeholders in the sense making. Due to the participatory aspect of this step, the links between the DMEL, Program team as well as partners was strengthened. There was more ownership of the program interventions and motivation since even small successes were identified and celebrated. The step also called for program reflection and strategic thinking as a team.

Lessons Learned

Training

- a) The pressure cooker approach/ writeshops are effective in cultivating collaborative peer-to-peer learning. Starting workshops with a brainstorming phase, where harvesters draft outcomes help in identifying the real outcome rather than the back and forth that comes when harvesters are remotely harvesting the outcomes.
- b) If OH is not well facilitated, there is a risk of the perception that the methodology replaces the conventional M&E rather than its complementary nature.

This perception is illuminated more especially under the contribution section where activities might be vague or lack essential details such as dates. This therefore needs persistent ping-pong but also insistent that OH only complements the conventional M&E which must be carried out irrespective of OH.

- c) Training those implementing the program rather than the organization management is more sustainable and effective at the long run. This should be a strict eligibility criterion for identified harvesters who should be tasked with the responsibility of cascading the information to the rest of the program staff in their respective organizations. This ensures that there is knowledge management even as staff leave their organizations before the program end.
- d) Conducting a refresher drill on key aspects in M&E before the actual OH training goes a long way in complementing the skills and knowledge on OH. Sometimes partners have limited M&E skills and therefore initial introduction to the key aspects

helps them in understanding the core concepts of OH as well as the identification and writing of the outcome statements.



Harvesting the Outcomes

- a) Integration of OH during program review and reflection meetings increases team ownership and common understanding since everyone

is able to see the program's bigger picture.

- b) It is difficult to harvest negative outcomes. This is not tied to the approach (which is similar across board) but because when self-reporting, change agents are less likely to recall, track, document, and report negative outcomes. There is need to encourage the description of such outcomes including making safe learning spaces for harvesting.
- c) To avoid the rush, OH should be made real time (outcomes harvested as they unfold). This should be encouraged especially during quarterly reporting.

Investing in more time allocation for coordinators will go a long way in quality control of the process.



To cultivate ownership of program interventions and outcomes, the review of ToC should be tied to the analysis and assessment of the outcomes harvested.



The Review Process

- a) The identification and formulation of outcomes can be very challenging for change agents who are more familiar to reporting on outputs or what they have done rather than changes in the social actor. The ping-pong process is time intensive and can be demotivating and draining at the same time. In addition, facilitating the process

can be draining since it depends on trust and openness of those describing outcomes to accept feedback. There is therefore a need to cultivate and maintain interest of harvesters through different but appealing ping-pong methods (skype meetings, phone calls, one-on-one conversations) instead of only email. In addition, investing in more time allocation for

coordinators will go a long way in quality control of the process.



Substantiation Process

- a) Substantiators engagement should have a mix of approaches to ensure a whole range of persons who are selected as such are covered. This should either be face-to-face interviews, phone calls, emails, Skype meetings among other methods. In addition, where language interpretation is required, it should be provided.
- b) The identification of substantiators should be done during the harvesting of the outcomes. This avoids the challenges that come with looking for substantiators (and even harvesters) who may have moved on.

Analysis and use of harvested outcomes

- a) To cultivate ownership of program interventions and outcomes, the review of ToC should be tied to the analysis and assessment of the outcomes harvested. This is important when implementing advocacy initiatives in complex programming contexts (which by nature are full of uncertainties) and small changes building into larger results should be celebrated.

References

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