Outcome Harvesting

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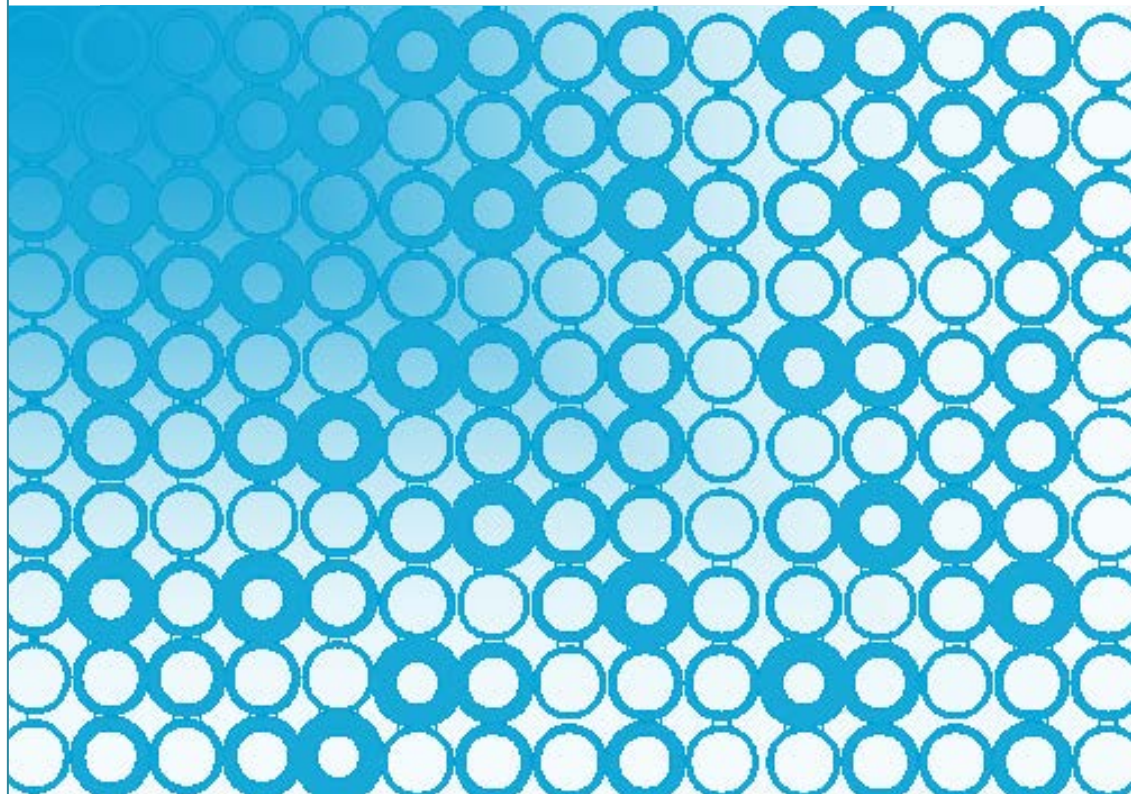
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Preface

Outcome Harvesting was developed by Ricardo Wilson-Grau with colleagues Barbara Klugman, Claudia Fontes, David Wilson-Sánchez, Fe Briones Garcia, Gabriela Sánchez, Goele Scheers, Heather Britt, Jennifer Vincent, Julie Lafreniere, Juliette Majot, Marcie Mersky, Martha Nuñez, Mary Jane Real, Natalia Ortiz, and Wolfgang Richert. Over the past 8 years, Outcome Harvesting and has been used to monitor and evaluate the achievements of hundreds of networks, non-governmental organizations, research centers, think tanks, and community-based organizations around the world.

This brief is intended to introduce the concepts and approach used in Outcome Harvesting to grant makers, managers, and evaluators, with the hope that it may inspire them to learn more about the method and apply it to appropriate contexts. Thus, it is not a comprehensive guide to or explanation of the method, but an introduction to allow evaluators and decision makers to determine if the method is appropriate for their evaluation needs. Where possible, we have included examples to illustrate how Outcome Harvesting is applied to real situations. For each case story, organizations were asked to provide a description of the outcome and a summary of the role played by the organization. Sometimes they added other information such as the outcome's significance. Some details and identifiers were redacted for confidentiality purposes.

A draft of this brief was graciously commented on by Bob Williams, Fred Carden, Sarah Earl, Richard Hummelbrunner and Terry Smutylo. The final text is, of course, the sole responsibility of the authors and editor.

Introduction to Outcome Harvesting

Outcome Harvesting 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.[1] Using Outcome Harvesting, the evaluator or harvester gleans information from reports, personal interviews, and other sources to document how a given program or initiative has contributed to outcomes. These outcomes can be positive or negative, intended or unintended, but the connection between the initiative and the outcomes should be verifiable.

Box 1

Sleuthing for Answers

Outcome Harvesting is like forensic science in that it applies a broad spectrum of techniques to yield evidence-based answers to the following questions:

- What happened?
- Who did it (or contributed to it)?
- How do we know this? Is there corroborating evidence?
- Why is this important? What do we do with what we found out?

Answers to these questions provide important information about the contributions made by a specific program toward a given outcome or outcomes.

Unlike some evaluation methods, 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 (Box 1). Information is collected, or harvested, from the individual or organization whose actions influenced the outcome(s) to answer specific, useable questions. The harvested information goes through a winnowing process during which it is validated or substantiated by comparing it to information collected from knowledgeable, independent sources. The substantiated information is then analyzed 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 questions that were initially posed.

Basic Definitions

Outcome: a change in the behavior, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or institution.

Outcome Harvest: the identification, formulation, analysis, and interpretation of outcomes to answer useable questions.

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[1] This definition of outcome was developed by the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) about 10 years ago and is widely used by development and social change programs. See Earl, S., Carden, F., & Smutylo, T. (2001). *Outcome Mapping: Building Learning and Reflection into Development Programs.* Ottawa: IDRC (retrievable from http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-26586-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html) and the Outcome Mapping Learning Community at www.outcomemapping.ca.

When Is Outcome Harvesting Useful?

Outcome Harvesting can be a useful monitoring and evaluation tool for the right situations, however, it is not well-suited to all programs or interventions. In particular, Outcome Harvesting works well when outcomes, rather than activities, are the critical focus. In addition, it is suitable for evaluating complex programming contexts.

Focus on outcomes rather than activities. Outcome Harvesting is designed for situations where decision makers, or *harvest users,* are interested in learning about achievements rather than activities, and about effects rather than implementation. It is especially useful when the aim is to understand the process of change and how each outcome contributes to this change, rather than simply to accumulate a list of results.

Complex programming contexts. Outcome Harvesting is suitable for complex programming contexts where relations of cause and effect are not fully understood. Conventional monitoring and evaluation aimed at determining results compares planned outcomes with what is actually achieved. In complex environments, however, objectives and the paths to achieve them are largely unpredictable and predefined objectives and theories of change must be modified over time to respond to changes in the context. Outcome Harvesting is especially useful when the aim is to understand how individual outcomes contribute to broader system-wide changes. Advocacy, campaigning, and policy work are ideal candidates for this approach.

Monitoring and evaluation. Outcome Harvesting can be used for both monitoring and evaluation. As a monitoring tool, Outcome Harvesting can provide real-time information about achievements (Box 2). Outcome Harvesting is useful for ongoing developmental, midterm formative, and end-of-term summative evaluations.[2] It may be used as a comprehensive evaluation approach or combined with other methods.

> **Box 2**
>
> ### Outcome Harvesting: A Useful Tool for Both Monitoring and Evaluation
>
> **Monitoring** is the periodic and systematic collection of data regarding the implementation and results of a specific intervention.
>
> **Developmental evaluation** informs and supports a change agent who is implementing innovative approaches in complex dynamic situations. The process applies evaluative thinking to project, program or organizational development by asking evaluative questions, applying evaluation logic, and gathering and reporting evaluative data throughout the innovation process.
>
> **Formative evaluation** analyzes and interprets evidence collected either through previous monitoring or specifically for the evaluation with the purpose of improving the change agent's performance and accountability. It is usually performed midway through a change agent's planned intervention.
>
> **Summative evaluation** consists of the same process as formative but the purpose is to judge the merit, value, or significance of the change agent's intervention and is carried out at the end of a change agent's intervention.

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[2] For more information on developmental evaluation, the newest of these three modes, see Patton, M.Q. (2011). *Developmental Evaluation - Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use.* New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Strengths and Limitations of Outcome Harvesting

Outcome Harvesting focuses on all results, whether good or bad, planned or unplanned. Because of this, Outcome Harvesting is able to capture aspects of the elusive process of change that are beyond the control of the individual or organization which served as a *change agent* to influence these outcomes. The process draws on the knowledge of key informants who understand the change that has taken place, as well as their contributions to that change.

Outcome Harvesting is characterized by the following **strengths**:

- Corrects the common failure to search for unintended results.
- Has verifiable harvested outcomes.
- Uses a logical, accessible approach that makes it easy to engage informants.
- Employs various means to collect data: face-to-face interviews or workshops, communication across distances (surveys, telephone, or email), and written documentation.
- Ties the level of detail provided in the descriptions directly to the questions defined at the outset of the process; these descriptions may be as brief as a single sentence or as detailed as page or more of text, and may or may not include explanations of other variables.

Because of its nature, Outcome Harvesting also has certain **limitations and challenges**:

- Skill and time are required to identify and formulate high-quality outcome descriptions.
- Only those outcomes that the informant is aware of are captured.
- Participation of those who influence(d) the outcomes to be harvested is crucial.
- Starting with the outcomes and working backward represents a new way of thinking about change for some participants.

The Basics of Outcome Harvesting

Outcome Harvesting can be used for the monitoring or evaluation of projects, programs, networks, or organizations. Depending on the situation, an external or internal evaluator, or harvester, can be designated to lead the Outcome Harvesting process. To ensure success, the harvester serves change agents, individuals, or organizations who participate(d) actively and contribute(d) to the outcome. The harvest user, who requires the findings to make decisions, is also engaged throughout the process.

> **Who Are the Main Players in an Outcome Harvest?**
>
> **Change agent:** Individual or organization that influences an outcome.
>
> **Social actor:** Individual, group, community, organization, or institution that changes as a result 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, often an evaluator (external or internal).

The method consists of six iterative steps:

1. ***Design the Outcome Harvest***: Harvest users and harvesters identify *useable questions* to guide the harvest. Both users and harvesters agree on what information is to be collected and included in the *outcome description* as well as on the changes in the social actors and how the change agent influenced them.

2. ***Gather data and draft outcome descriptions***: Harvesters glean information about changes that have occurred in social actors and how the change agent contributed to these changes. Information about outcomes may be found in documents or collected through interviews, surveys, and other sources. The harvesters write preliminary outcome descriptions with questions for review and clarification by the change agent.

3. ***Engage change agents in formulating outcome descriptions:*** Harvesters engage directly with change agents to review the draft outcome descriptions, identify and formulate additional outcomes, and classify all outcomes. Change agents often consult with well-informed individuals (inside or outside their organization) who can provide information about outcomes.

4. ***Substantiate***: Harvesters obtain the views of independent individuals knowledgeable about the outcome(s) and how they were achieved; this validates and enhances the credibility of the findings.

5. ***Analyze and interpret***: Harvesters organize outcome descriptions through a database in order to make sense of them, analyze and interpret the data, and provide evidence-based answers to the useable harvesting questions.

6. ***Support use of findings:*** Drawing on the evidence-based, actionable answers to the useable questions, harvesters propose points for discussion to harvest users, including how the users might make use of findings. The harvesters also wrap up their contribution by accompanying or facilitating the discussion amongst harvest users.

Each of these steps is described in more detail in the following sections. In most cases, it is recommended that a professional evaluator who is familiar with the method be retained to guide the initial application of the process.

① Design the Outcome Harvest

In Step 1, harvest users and harvesters identify useable questions to guide the harvest, and agree on what information is to be collected in addition to the change in the social actor and how it came about.[3] They also come to agreement about the kind of information that will answer *useable* questions that will lead to actionable answers, the level of detail required, the best data sources, and the classifications for analysis. Box 3 shows some of the design considerations for an Outcome Harvest intended to determine the impact of a grant portfolio that aims to strengthen global civil society.

Box 3

Outcome Harvest Design Example 1

Users of the Outcome Harvest: The primary intended users of the evaluation are the donor's management team for the grant portfolio. In contrast, the grantee change agents would be one audience for the evaluation.

Uses of the Outcome Harvest: There are two primary intended uses of this evaluation: (1) to document the outcomes of 8 years of grant making, and (2) to improve the strategy of portfolios at the foundation that are oriented toward democratizing global governing institutions or nurturing a "field."

Useable Question: *What* has been the collective effect of grantees on making the global governance regime more democratic and *what does it mean* for the portfolio′s strategy?

Definitions to Help with Design

Useable Questions: Questions that guide the Outcome Harvest because the answers to these questions will be especially useful to the harvest users.

Outcome Description: The formulation of who changed what, when and where it took place, and how the change agent contributed to that outcome are combined in sufficient specificity and measurability to enable the harvest user to take action.

At the most basic level, Outcome Harvesting documents a change in a social actor. Sometimes it is enough to discover **who** changed **what**, **when** and **where** it was changed, and **how** the change agent contributed to the outcome. At other times, **it may be** essential to describe the outcome's significance. It may be useful to include other dimensions such as the history, context, contribution of other social actors, and emerging evidence of impact on people's lives or the state of the environment. Regardless of what is being collected, it is important that harvest users and harvesters agree on the detail required: Will a simple description suffice or should each dimension be explained? Will one or two sentences be enough or are several paragraphs required to describe each dimension?

Data may be collected from the social actors influenced as well as from document reviews. Initially, however, the gleaning of data begins with program documents and program staff.

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[3] Outcome Harvesting is utilization-focused in the sense of the approach to evaluation of this name developed by Michael Quinn Patton. [Patton, M.Q. (2008). *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Patton, M.Q. (2011). *Essentials of Utilization-Focused Evaluation: A Primer*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.]

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Focus on Pertinent Data

Data collection seeks verifiable evidence:

1. *Outcome*: *Who* has the change agent influenced to change *what*, and *when* and *where* was it changed? What is the observable, verifiable change that can be seen in the individual, group, community, organization, or institution? What is being done differently that is significant?

2. *Contribution*: *How* did the change agent contribute to this change? Concretely, what did she, he, or they do that influenced the change?

Again, it is important to note that the Outcome Harvesting process reverses the logic of conventional monitoring and evaluation. Rather than tracking activities and outputs to see whether they are generating results as planned, harvesters first identify outcomes, whether planned or not, and then determine how the change agent contributed. To establish contribution – indirect or direct, partial or whole, intended or not – beyond a reasonable doubt, the harvester uses three mechanisms:

1. *Reported* (and validated) **observations** such as progress reports, evaluations, and case studies.

2. *Direct critical observation*, for example, what is seen in writing, heard during telephone conversations, or observed during a field visit.

3. Direct or simple *inductive inference* from items 1 or 2, for example, insider information given to a journalist and published leads to international pressure.

> **Definition: Contribution**
>
> Verifiable explanation of **how** the change agent contributed to the outcome.

Choose Data Sources to Ensure Credibility

During the design process, the harvesters carefully plan how to ensure the credibility of the findings when choosing the sources and methods for obtaining data. As in any monitoring or evaluation activity, the credibility of the outcome descriptions resides in sources of data that are authentic, reliable, and believable. The best informants are those with the most intimate knowledge of what changed and how it changed – the change agents. Thus, using change agents as a source provides one important element of credibility.

Of course, change agents have a vested interest in understanding what they have *really* achieved and that must be balanced with their desire to see that they accomplished their intended results. Thus, the customary triangulation of sources enhances credibility. These purposes are also served by substantiating the outcome descriptions with independent third parties knowledgeable about the outcome and the change agent's contribution.

In any case, credibility is relative and depends on the primary intended users' trust in the data, in the process through which data are generated, and in the harvester. The intended uses of the monitoring or evaluation findings dictates how specific the description of each outcome must be; that is, how concrete, tangible, and verifiable these descriptions must be to make them useful. Therefore, it is important to agree from the start on the data and sources that will make the findings sufficiently credible for the primary intended users and their uses.

If possible, harvest users and harvesters also agree from the beginning on how the information will be classified during interpretation and analysis. The classifications are usually derived from the useable monitoring or evaluation questions. Classifications may also be related to the objectives and strategies of either the change agent or other stakeholders, such as donors.

Collect Data as Frequently as Needed

Outcome Harvesting is done as often as necessary to understand what the change agent is achieving; the frequency depends on the predictability of the time required to bring about desired changes. Depending on the time period covered by the monitoring or evaluation, and the number of outcomes involved, the method can require a substantial time commitment from informants. It is especially time-consuming to document outcomes that occurred in the distant past. To reduce the burden of time on informants, outcomes are harvested monthly, quarterly, biannually, or annually. Findings may be substantiated, analyzed, and interpreted less frequently, if desired.

The timing of the harvest depends on how essential the harvest findings are to ensure the program is heading in the right direction. If the certainty is relatively great that doing A will result in B, the harvest can be timed to coincide with when the results are expected. Conversely, if much uncertainty exists about the results that the program will achieve, the harvest should be scheduled as soon as possible to determine the results that are actually being achieved. Once the design of the Outcome Harvest has been finalized, work can begin on harvesting outcomes.

② Review Documentation and Draft Outcome Descriptions

During Step 2, the harvesters review reports, evaluations, press releases, and any other material on file to identify outcomes and the activities used to achieve them. If no written documentation exists, harvesters collect primary data from other sources, including the social actors who experienced change. Using these data sources, harvesters draft an initial description (or explanation) of the outcome and the other dimensions, such as the *contribution* of the change agent, at the level of detail and specificity that were agreed upon during Step 1. The description can be brief (as shown by the example in Box 4) or more detailed (as in Box 5, next page).

Each outcome describes a change in a social actor that the change agent influenced. The change can be in behavior, relationships, actions, policies, or practices. The influence of the change agent can range from inspiring and encouraging, to facilitating and supporting, to persuading, to pressuring the social actor to change.

> **Box 4**
>
> **Sample 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 mobilization – including the "Stand Up and Be Counted" campaign, which mobilized 1.2 million people in 2008. Working with the Ministry of Labor, the coalition helped secure multilateral funding and delineate management of the fund.

Craft High-quality Outcome Descriptions

A superior outcome description depicts the contributions a change agent made towards a significant outcome. Outcome descriptions are brief but include *enough detail* so that those not familiar with the context can appreciate the significance of the achievement and find sufficient evidence of the change agent's contribution to make it credible. Outcomes and the change agent's contribution are SMARTly described:

- *Specific*: The outcome is formulated in sufficient detail so that a primary intended user without specialized subject or contextual knowledge will be able to understand and appreciate who changed what, when and where it changed, and how the change agent contributed.
- *Measurable*: The description of the outcome contains objective, verifiable quantitative and qualitative information, independent of who is collecting data. How much? How many? When and where did the change happen?
- *Achieved*: The description establishes a plausible relationship and logical link between the outcome and the change agent's actions that influenced it. In other words, how did the

change agent contribute to the outcome, in whole or part, indirectly or indirectly, intentionally or unexpectedly?

- *Relevant*: The outcome represents a significant step towards the impact that the change agent seeks. Those who identify and formulate the outcome and the contribution must be well placed to assess both. They should have a special position or experience that gives them the requisite knowledge to describe the outcome and how they contributed. Thus, anecdotal data become critical data because of the value of the informants.
- *Timely*: While the outcome occurred within the time period being monitored or evaluated, the change agent's contribution may have occurred months, or even years, before.

Box 5

Sample Detailed Outcome Description

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

Description: Palestine's Ministry of Labor, initially resistant to the proposal, is now working with civil society to rebuild and manage the Palestinian Fund for Employment and Social Protection. This fund will support the implementation of active labor market policies and measures in the occupied Palestinian territory to address the employment gap. The fund will provide a wide range of financial and non-financial services including employment services, employment guarantee schemes, enterprise development support, capacity development of small and medium enterprises, and employment-intensive public investment. Working in conjunction with the Ministry, supporting organizations of GCAP Palestine have secured bilateral and multilateral funding from aid agencies and governments.

Significance: This outcome demonstrates how mass citizen action can be combined with the engagement of political decision makers to lead to transformative changes in government policy and practice.

Contribution of Counterpart: After the presentation of a research report in 2007 on the economic impact of unemployment by the Democratic Workers Rights Centre (DWRC), the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP) coalition in Palestine was able to engage government in conversations on the creation of an employment fund. Dialogue was coupled with popular mobilization, including the "Stand Up and Be Counted" campaign. Stemming from an event including 10,000 people in 2006, this campaign mobilized 1.2 million people, over one quarter of the Palestinian population, in 2008. Working in conjunction with the Ministry of Labor, supporting organizations of GCAP Palestine helped secure multilateral funding for a pool of resources, and are currently delineating the management of the fund.

The elegant balance between brevity and completeness is best obtained by those with strong analytical and writing skills. To improve the quality of outcome descriptions, the harvester allows plenty of time for change agents to respond and supports them in crafting their outcome descriptions.

Document One or Many Outcomes

When harvesting a large number of outcome descriptions, the management of the harvest and the analysis is more complicated, but the six steps and the data collection approaches remain the same. For large, multidimensional programs (Box 6), a database is required to store and analyze the outcome descriptions (see Step 5).

Box 6

Examples of Outcome Harvests for Large, Multidimensional Programs

Oxfam Novib Global Programme for Sustainable Livelihoods and Political Participation. In 2010, a 5-year Outcome Harvest was performed for this €22 million program. The users wanted in-depth outcome descriptions, with multiple paragraphs describing each outcome, its significance, and how the 38 grantees contributed to the outcomes. The results of the harvest included nearly 200 outcomes reaped from 30 grantees, and the final document was 400 pages.

The UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women. In 2011, three evaluators harvested 653 outcomes from 61 grantees. These outcomes were "mapped" using one to two sentence outcome descriptions and another one or two sentences to document the contribution made by this US $48 million portfolio since 2006.

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③ Engage with Change Agents to Formulate Outcome Descriptions

During Step 3, the harvester engages directly with the change agents to review information extracted from the documentation and to collect additional information on outcomes and the dimensions considered necessary for a complete description. Identifying and formulating outcome descriptions can be a new and challenging task for change agents accustomed to reporting on what they have done rather than on changes in those they seek to influence. Harvesters should plan to engage intensely with change agents, "ping-ponging" as they revise drafts several times.

The first task is to ensure a shared understanding of the concept of outcome among change agent informants and other monitoring or evaluation participants. The harvester supports the change agent´s review of the draft outcome formulations with guiding questions, as shown in the example in Box 7.

Box 7

Sample Draft Outcome Sent to a Change Agent

Description: The Rita Fund is created in the United States. It is a woman's fund which strives to respond to the "funding gap" between donors' interests and their actual funding by creating a reliable non-restrictive funding source for women's funds operating worldwide.

Comment [RW-G1]: Who created this fund? When was it created? Specifically, where was it created?

Comment [RW-G2]: Is this an appropriate characterization of "funding gap"?

Contribution of change agent. The change agent's report "Where is the Money for Women's Rights" published in 2008, was the source of information and inspiration for the creation of the Rita Fund.

Comment [RW-G3]: Did you do something more active to influence the creation of the Fund?

Throughout the process, the harvester rigorously examines each outcome for specificity and coherence. For example, there must be a plausible rationale between the outcome and how the change agent contributed. The harvester also examines the rationale supporting claims of *significance* and other dimensions.

Clarify Level of Confidentiality Needed

Usually, change agents are informed at the beginning of the process that outcome descriptions will be made public and subjected to scrutiny. A large portion of the value of undertaking Outcome Harvesting is the learning that takes place among monitoring or evaluation users and audiences. This generally requires publicly sharing outcome descriptions. However, in certain cases making public the ways and means by which change agents influence outcomes could endanger or

compromise future work. Thus, confidentiality about who contributes to the change or how they contributed, or both, may be necessary. For example, in ongoing, politically delicate situations, the change agent may not want to reveal the strategy, or even the involvement, of the program or organization.

Even so, change agent informants must know that to qualify as an outcome, the change must be specific and concrete enough to be verified. Similarly, they should know that the description of their contribution, its significance, and other dimensions must be logical and believable. This motivates informants to review records, consult witnesses, and otherwise rely on evidence.

- From the beginning, harvesters make it clear to change agent informants that they will be on record, and obtain the appropriate consent.
- In cases where informants insist on confidentiality, harvesters explore the possibility of releasing a version of the outcome that does not reveal confidential information.
- Harvesters accept as final outcome descriptions only those formulations that, confidentially or not, contain solid, plausible evidence that can be substantiated.

Solicit Information on Outcomes

Engagement with change agents can be accomplished through surveys, questionnaires, or interviews delivered through a variety of means including paper, online, email, telephone, or face-to-face. It can also be accomplished in workshop or focus-group settings. Box 8 provides an example of a questionnaire that might be provided to change agent informants to solicit information on outcomes.

Box 8

Sample Outcome Harvesting Questionnaire

Outcome Description: In one or two sentences, summarize the observable change in the behavior, relationships, activities, or actions of a social actor influenced by the activities and outputs of the organization, program, or project over the past 12 months. That is, *who changed what, when and where?*

Who: Be as specific as possible about the individual, group, community, organization, or institution that changed.

What: State concretely what changes were noted in behavior, relationships, activities, policies, or practices.

When: Be as specific as possible about the date when the change took place.

Where: Similarly, include the political or geographic locale with the name of the community, village, town, or city where the actor operates – locally, nationally, regionally, and/or globally.

Organization's contribution: In one or two sentences, what was the organization's role in influencing the outcome? How did it inspire, persuade, support, facilitate, assist, pressure, or even force or otherwise contribute to the change in the social actor? Specify the organization's activities, processes, products, and services that you consider influenced each outcome.

Keep in mind that, while the outcome must be plausibly linked to the organization's activities, there is rarely a direct, linear relationship between an activity and an outcome. Also, one activity may influence two or more outcomes. Equally important, outcomes often are influenced by a variety of activities and other social actors over a period longer than 6 months. Thus, please mention the activities from this year or before that influenced each outcome.

Harvesters pointedly request change agents to report intended and unintended, positive and negative outcomes. They also make it known that if only positive outcomes are reported, one of two interpretations may be assumed: (1) the claims are not credible, or (2) the change agent is not taking enough risks. Harvesters also explain that they require specificity because some of the people who will read the outcomes will not know the subject and will be relatively ignorant of the context in which they are working. Instead of asking, "How many people were involved?" it is more helpful to exemplify what the harvester wants: "With more specificity, third parties will be able to appreciate the scope of the change. Thus, can you indicate how many people demanded land? Was it 5 to 10, approximately 100, or nearly 1,000?"

Revise / Develop Outcome Descriptions Using New Data

Using the information gathered from the change agent informants, the harvesters update the draft outcome descriptions developed in Step 2 or develop new outcome descriptions, as needed. Box 9 provides a sample outcome description developed from informant data and approved by the change agent. Note that in this real-life case, the harvester and the change agent (Association for Women´s Rights in Development, or AWID) agreed to harvest three additional pieces of information (sources, collaboration of others, and the region of the world where the change took place).

Box 9

Sample Outcome Description Based on Change Agent Data

Sources of information: Women Human Rights Defenders 2011 Activity Report (January 2012) and correspondence with the AWID team responsible for this strategic initiative.

Description: In mid-September 2011, the Iranian Ministry of the Interior (or the Secret Service) released "M.B." after 5 months in prison, 2 of which were spent in solitary confinement. No charges were made during her time in detention, although she was eventually released on bail and will be facing charges in the future. M.B. is a woman human rights defender from Iran who was detained after participating at the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York.

Contribution of AWID: Convened group of collaborators working together for M.B.'s release, organized conference calls, ensured sharing of information, and facilitated joint activities and direct contact with UN agencies. All of this was in the context of AWID as Chair of Urgent Responses Working Group for the WHRD International Coalition. The objective was to model collaboration among organizations, in addition to securing a concrete victory in getting M.B. released.

Geographical distribution: Middle East

Be Aware of Common Shortcomings

When considerable uncertainty and unpredictability about causality exist, it can be difficult to identify outcomes and describe the contribution of a change agent. Harvesters should be aware of some of the common shortcomings in this area and work with the informants to avoid these pitfalls.

- *Failure to identify concrete outcomes.* To qualify as outcomes, attitudinal changes such as increases in awareness, knowledge, and commitment or dedication require evidence of associated changes in behavior, relationships, actions, policies, or practices. Thus, a harvester seeks *observable* changes that can be verified.
- *Seeking attribution rather than contribution.* Influencing another social actor to change does not necessarily mean that the change should be attributed to the change agent. Interventions by change agents are rarely the sole reason for change in a social actor; in most cases, a change agent contributes to an outcome indirectly, partially, or even unintentionally. Changes often occur some time after the change agent's activity; also, an activity of a change agent typically occurs in concert or in parallel with other initiatives (of the same or other change agents). In many cases, change agents are not aware of some changes they have influenced. In short, no harvest is expected to be exhaustive.
- *Failure to establish credible contribution.* Since there is rarely a linear, straightforward relationship between change agent actions and the changes influenced by these actions, the challenge is to establish a plausible relationship of cause and effect.
- *Failure to recognize non-action as an outcome*. Influencing a social actor *not* to take action – that is, preventing something undesirable from happening – can be a significant outcome, but is often awkward to formulate as a change.
- *Failure to report negative outcomes*. A change agent may inadvertently contribute to changes which significantly detract from, undermine, or obstruct a desirable result. When self-reporting, change agents are less likely to recall, track, document, and report negative outcomes.

In sum, a non-punitive environment that encourages learning and risk-taking is fundamental to the success of Outcome Harvesting. Additionally, reporting only positive outcomes highlights the need for credibility checks.

④ Substantiate

Step 4 aims to enhance the reliability of data and data analysis and enrich the understanding of the change and its other dimensions (for example, significance, the collaboration of others, and the contribution of the change agent). To substantiate the outcome descriptions, the harvester obtains testimonies and feedback from independent substantiators. It is important to keep in mind that greater claims of change are likely to required greater evidence and substantiation.

> **Definition: Substantiation**
>
> Confirmation of the substance of an Outcome Description by an informant knowledgeable about the outcome, but independent of the change agent.

Regardless of the evidence provided by change agents, the outcomes and contributions they report have a strong subjective dimension. The harvester seeks to triangulate the sources of information regarding the outcome; the change agent's reports to external evaluators and communication with representative(s) of the change agent other than the report writer are the usual sources. In addition, the perspectives of third parties will enhance the credibility of the harvest. Substantiation provides this perspective.

Although the main purpose of collecting the testimonies of independent substantiators is to establish the degree of truth and accuracy of the outcome description and contribution, these testimonies can also be important for providing a richer, deeper understanding of the outcome and the contribution of the change agent. Independent substantiators are positioned outside the change agent organization, but are well-informed about the outcome and the change agent's contribution, as well as other dimensions of the outcome description.

Choose a Substantiator

Change agents may recommend one or more key individuals who have working knowledge of the outcome as substantiators. Alternatively, other stakeholders, such as donors or strategic allies, may choose who should substantiate. An external panel of experts can be used to substantiate groups of outcomes. Also, depending on the number of outcomes and the scope of the monitoring or evaluation, a sample of the total number of outcome descriptions might be selected for substantiation. In all cases, the criteria for selecting whether and how to substantiate depend on the degree of credibility required by the uses for the findings. As with Step 3 (engagement with change agents), the harvester can obtain substantiation virtually or in person.

Provide a Clear Method for Substantiation

Once a credible (independent and knowledgeable) substantiator has been selected, the harvester presents the final outcome formulation to that individual or group of individuals and

asks for an opinion (to go on record). Box 10 shows how a harvester might use a questionnaire to substantiate the information about the AWID-related outcome description described earlier (Box 9).

Box 10

Sample Format for Requesting Substantiation of Outcome Formulation

Provide the outcome description (Box 8), and then ask the substantiator to complete the following record of opinion:

1. To what degree you are in agreement with the description of the government of Iran´s decision to free M.B.?

    [ ] Fully agree

    [ ] Partially agree

    [ ] Disagree

    Comments, if you like:

2. How much do you agree with the description of how AWID influenced the Iranian government's decision?

    [ ] Fully agree

    [ ] Partially agree

    [ ] Disagree

    Comments, if you like:

Comments are useful when a substantiator disagrees or is in partial agreement with the outcome description because they enable the harvester to decide whether or not to discount the outcome. For example, comments may show that a substantiator disagrees with the formulation of the outcome because it is incomplete, not because what is written is factually erroneous.

A primary intended user may require (and be willing to invest in obtaining) multiple perspectives regarding the change and the various contributions that led to the change, and which may enrich the outcome formulation. Different perspectives about complex outcomes and contributions to those changes are inevitable. The deeper the harvester digs, the greater the differences of opinion may be, and it may not be possible to reconcile such differences. In such cases, harvesters note the varying perspectives and focus on comparing and contrasting them. This highlights the importance of defining, early in the process, how much detail and how many perspectives are needed to provide full descriptions and sufficient credibility for the intended uses. In sum, the harvesting process is one of approximation to identify the essential facts of the matter and not one of negotiating differences of opinion about how or why a change did or did not happen.

⑤ Analyze and Interpret

After the outcome descriptions have been finalized and substantiated, the harvester organizes the outcomes so they can be employed to answer the useable questions defined in Step 1. For example, to answer the question "To what extent did the outcomes we influenced in 2009–2011 represent patterns of progress towards our strategic objectives," the harvester might classify the outcomes according to strategic objectives, country or region, and year. The interpretation of the outcomes depends on what the users will find most useful. Interpretive lenses can range from the philosophical to the theoretical and practical.

Analyze the Outcomes

Analysis involves the identification of patterns and processes among clusters of outcomes, and often focuses on the theories of change underlying a common change objective. Depending on the program context and monitoring or evaluation purpose, a harvester may choose to analyze outcomes and answer useable questions at one of the three following levels:

- For each outcome
- For all the outcomes of a single change agent
- For an overarching program or systems change initiative to which the various outcomes of multiple change agents relate

Each outcome. Analysis and interpretation of individual outcomes are especially useful when a wealth of data is included in the description of the outcome (for example, Box 5). Outcome descriptions that include complementary information, such as the significance, history, context, and contribution of other social actors, are particularly appropriate for individual analysis. If the descriptions of the outcome and the contribution of the change agent include lengthy text, the outcome may lend itself to presentation as a story in which the description and contribution are woven together with expert interpretation. Outcomes that have been classified in multiple ways may also be worthy of individual analysis.

Outcomes of a single change agent. Usually, analysis and interpretation focuses on groups of related outcomes of a single change agent or of a cohort of agents. In such situations, the harvester asks: How do the outcomes add up? Are processes of change revealed? Do the outcomes of a number of change agents combine synergistically to create broader and deeper changes?

Overarching program with multiple change agents. The harvester looks for patterns across outcomes and change agent contributions. Do the outcomes of several change agents combine synergistically to create broader and deeper changes?

For a large and complex program, the use of a database is necessary to track and analyze the various outcomes and change agents. For example, the analysis of the UN program described earlier (Box 6) involved three dozen variables and the use of a Microsoft Access database.

A number of techniques may be used to facilitate analysis of multiple outcomes, including stories, charts, and visualizations. A story may be crafted to describe how a number of related outcomes contributed to a common process of change. Working with a number of outcomes will generally necessitate summarizing and organizing information to make it more intelligible than raw descriptions. A small number of outcomes can be summarized quite well with a simple table (Table 1). The number of outcomes that can be organized manageably this way depends on the size of the outcome and contribution descriptions. Obviously, it is easier to work with one sentence descriptions than lengthier versions.

Visualizing the data can greatly facilitate interpretation. Visualizations may be hand-drawn or generated by a database as long as they aid in the

Table 1. Simple Outcome Analysis

Objective	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Healthcare delivery	Outcome A Outcome C	Outcome D Outcome F Outcome G	Outcome I
Health advocacy	Outcome B	Outcome E Outcome H	Outcome J Outcome K Outcome L

identification of patterns in the data. Figure 1 shows an example of outcomes organized by year and type of outcome. The analysis involves 17 outcomes related to women's inheritance in a single African country. Three types of outcomes are identified: policy changes, practice changes, and changes that contributed to either policy or practice changes.

When more than few dozen outcomes are involved, or when outcomes are classified in a number of different ways, uploading the descriptions and classifications into a database (for example, Microsoft Excel or Access) can be indispensable. The database enables the harvester to generate charts and tables that organize the data from different perspectives. A number of stories of change or meta-stories can be constructed from such analysis. For example, if the program shown in Figure 1 involved 200 outcomes in five countries covering women's inheritance, a database would be needed. In this case, using a database would permit the harvester to see how outcomes across classifications are related to one another. In addition, stories of change comparing and contrasting the processes in the five countries could be told.
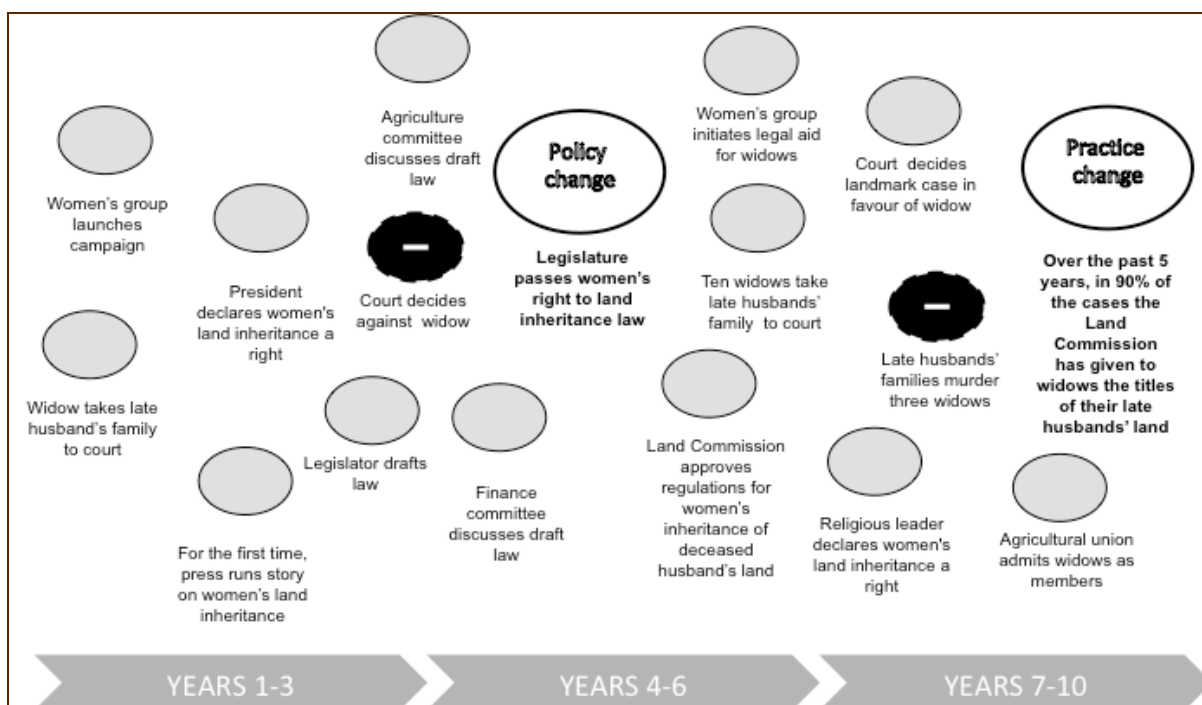
Interpret the Outcomes

Analyzing outcomes enables a harvester to give an evidence-based answer to the question of *what* has been achieved. In simple monitoring exercises, analysis of outcomes may satisfy the users' needs. For developmental, formative, or summative evaluations, whether combined with monitoring or not, the useable questions and the resultant answers address the question of "**so what?**" To help understand the meaning of the outcomes, the harvester employs interpretative tools and approaches.

Figure 1. Example of Change Analysis: Women's Inheritance Rights in an African Country

"Making sense" of outcomes is tied directly to how findings will be used, which affects how the harvester will answer the useable questions. The interpretive lens may be focused exclusively on the harvest user´s vision and mission, institutional goals, theory of change, or strategic or annual plans. On the other hand, the field of vision may be broad, allowing the harvesters to apply their theoretical knowledge or professional judgement and expertise to make sense of the outcomes. For example, the useable question "What has been the collective effect of grantees on making the global governance regime more democratic and what does it mean for the portfolio´s strategy?" (Box 3) led harvesters to examine outcomes from the perspective of their knowledge about the movement to democratize institutions such as the World Bank and the United Nations. Likewise, the outcomes of the two grant makers mentioned in Box 6 (Oxfam and the UN) were interpreted through the lens of their respective grant-making strategies and priorities, and the expertise of the harvesting team.

⑥ Support Use of Findings

Outcome Harvesting aims to generate answers about *what* was achieved and *how* it was achieved. In addition, it addresses the question of "**so what**?" In other words, what does the evidence gathered imply in terms of decision-making or other actions? An Outcome Harvest that answers useable questions, commonly in the form of a written report and workshop presentation, goes a long way towards ensuring actionable findings.

A successful Outcome Harvest that has been guided by useable questions will enable harvesters to draw reasonable conclusions from solid evidence. Harvesters ensure that the information on outcomes is well-formulated, plausible, and verifiable, and then they accurately interpret and make judgments about the relationships among the data so they can answer the useable questions by drawing conclusions based on evidence. Based on the actionable findings, harvesters propose points for discussion for the primary users.

Harvest users take into account the Outcome Harvest findings as one of many important factors to determine what decisions or actions they will take. In addition, there are usually other political, legal, public perception, financial, programmatic, and ethical considerations that must be considered. Such factors are often confidential or highly sensitive and thus unknown to the harvesters.

Consequently, harvesters can recommend discussion points around harvest findings, but rarely can make recommendations for action. Yet, when invited to do so, harvesters are well-positioned to support, and even facilitate, the use of the findings of the harvest.

In the example in Box 11, the harvester presented the outcomes achieved per cost center, which correspond to the different programs of activities and outputs. These patterns of progress were expectedly varied. Then, because the harvester (rightfully) did not have sufficient internal knowledge about the organization to answer the cost-effectiveness question, he suggested a process of in-house discussion about issues related to the cost-effectiveness of outcomes. For example, it was notable that the gender equity program had a low number of direct outcomes compared to the other programs. The harvester pointed out that the outcomes had been classified according to the *principal* program to which they corresponded. The gender equity program, however, was designed to be "mainstreamed" and support outcomes across the board. The question, then, was how to assess the effectiveness of the cross-cutting gender equity program.

> **Box 11**
>
> ## Outcome Harvest Design Example 2
>
> **Monitoring and Evaluation of a National Rights-Holders Program**
>
> **Users and uses of the Outcome Harvest**: *Management team* requires information about program effectiveness *to make funding decisions* for the next 3 years.
>
> **Useable Questions:**
> - To what extent did the outcomes we influenced in 2009–2011 represent patterns of progress towards strategic objectives?
> - Was the investment in the activities and outputs that contributed to 2009–2011 outcomes cost-effective?

◯ In Summary

The six-step Outcome Harvest method is useful for assessing and reporting on the contributions of change agents who bring about changes in the behaviors, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of social actors. Outcome Harvesting provides insight into how change agents influence(d) outcomes and the means they use(d) to inspire, support, facilitate, persuade, or pressure change. The method is especially useful in complex programming contexts where results cannot be predicted and a number of actors and factors effect outcomes. Findings include both quantitative data on the number of outcomes, as well as qualitative data describing the outcomes, change agent contribution, and other important outcome dimensions.