Brief on Outcome Harvesting

The evaluation approach

Outcome Harvesting is an evaluation method that involves identifying, formulating, analyzing, and interpreting outcomes to answer evaluation questions. In this approach, an outcome is defined as an observable change in the behavior (such as actions, relationships, policies, practices) of individuals, groups, communities, organizations or institutions influenced by an intervention. It involves collecting evidence of what has changed and then working backwards to determine if and how a project or an intervention contributed to that change. The method can be used retrospectively as well as prospectively.

The steps and the practice

This evaluation approach is organized into six major steps. However, it is not always necessary to carry out all of these steps, and some may be carried out together.

Step 1 – Design the harvest

At this step, there is a need to identify the users of the harvest and other stakeholders who might be interested in the findings. The uses/objectives of the harvest are then defined, and evaluation questions are developed to guide the harvest. Finally, it is necessary to agree on the information that is to be collected and how to collect it in order to answer these questions.

IN PRACTICE

From the harvest design stage (i.e. the writing of the evaluation protocol), it is important to engage users and provide them with the basic elements so that they can understand this evaluation approach and the role they will play. The specific sense of "outcome" in particular is sometimes difficult to grasp. Understanding user expectations will be equally critical, and having a good understanding of the intervention being evaluated will be an added strength for evaluators.

Step 2 – Review documentation and draft outcomes

Step 2 involves collecting and reviewing documentation related to the intervention and extracting the potential outcomes and how different actors contributed to these outcomes.

IN PRACTICE

For this step, it is important to specify the type of documents that may contain outcomes: minutes of meetings of the technical group that implemented the intervention, reports to donors, monitoring documents, etc. It will not always be possible to collect a large number of documents containing outcomes. However, any documents related to the intervention will help the evaluator better understand the initiative and the activities that were implemented.

Step 3 – Engage with the sources to complete and review the outcomes

The evaluation team then meets with key informants to validate the outcomes and their descriptions, and to gather additional information. Close engagement with informants reinforces the claims and stories that emerge from the evaluation.

IN PRACTICE

When it is not possible to gather a sufficient number of useful documents in the previous step, the engagement with the sources will be very important in order to harvest the outcomes. This step can take place at the beginning of the harvest and continue until the end.

Step 4 – Substantiate the declaration of outcomes with external sources

The objective of this step is to have a set of outcomes that are sufficiently credible to meet the needs of users. Substantiation consists of selecting outcomes to verify and corroborate their description with knowledgeable external actors.

IN PRACTICE

If a large number of interviews are needed to collect outcomes, it is important to engage with sources representing a variety of organizations so that different perspectives can be collected and data can be triangulated, especially if the evaluation is retrospective.

Step 5 – Analyze and interpret

In the context of Outcome Harvesting, analysis is the organization of data, while interpretation is the use of data to answer the evaluation questions. The result of interpretation will be a story that answers the evaluation questions in a way that is useful to users.

IN PRACTICE

The categories through which the outcomes are organized generally emerge from the data collected and/or the evaluation questions. It is important to re-question oneself regularly during the interpretation of the data to ensure that the expectations of the users are being met and that the findings will be useful to them. If this is not the case, it is important to adapt the approach to address any gaps.

Step 6 – Support the use of findings

At this step, evaluators facilitate discussions with users to help them understand how to use the harvest findings. The goal is to engage them in a process of using the findings.

IN PRACTICE

A presentation of the findings followed by a question & answer period can be organized with users and other interested stakeholders. Dissemination of the harvest findings to the sources that participated in the harvesting of the outcomes can contribute to the use of these findings.

Questions & Answers

- **How to describe and formulate an outcome?**

  The description of an outcome is the written formulation of "who changed what, when and where, and how it was influenced". Ideally, these outcomes will be specific and measurable, will have been plausibly achieved by the intervention, will be relevant to the objectives of the intervention, and will have occurred within the time period covered by the harvest. It is recommended to start by identifying an outcome and specifying its source. Then the contribution to that outcome can be identified, followed by its significance.

- **What is meant by "influence" when considering "change" that is "influenced" by an intervention?**

  Influence is understood in its broadest sense and is outside the scope of the intervention's control. It is not about what the intervention did, which can be quite impressive, but rather what it influenced. Influence ranges from inspiration and encouragement to support and facilitation. Persuading or pressuring an actor to change are also other forms of influence. However, when direct funding has influenced a change in behavior, this change will not be considered an outcome.

- **What is the role of the evaluator in conducting such an evaluation?**

  The evaluator plays several roles when using this evaluation method. He or she will be the harvester when harvesting the outcomes, and will act as a "coach" when engaging with the sources. In this coaching role, it is important that the evaluators approach this as in the capacity of co-learner with their sources, rather than as an external judge of the merit or value of what the sources are doing and achieving.

- **What level of commitment is required from sources/participants?**

  Outcome Harvesting requires some commitment from participants (users and sources), which may not be possible for all. Harvest users, for example, need to be engaged throughout the process. In this sense, their willingness to engage in the process should be quite high. Sources must also be available, especially if documentation is limited. Therefore, evaluators need to consider the accessibility, time, and availability of participants, which are critical to the successful completion of the outcome harvest.

The authors of this brief drew on information from Ricardo Wilson-Grau's book on Outcome Harvesting (Wilson-Grau, Ricardo. Outcome Harvesting: Principles, steps, and evaluation applications. IAP, 2018.), and the lessons they learned from applying this approach during the evaluation of the "Stronger with Breastmilk Only" initiative in four countries in Central and West Africa.