

SBC Monitoring Guidance

Outcome Harvesting

What is Outcome Harvesting?

Outcome harvesting is a monitoring and evaluation method used to identify, verify, and make sense of changes influenced by an intervention. As opposed to assessing progress toward pre-established objectives, outcome harvesting takes a retroactive approach to identifying both intended and unintended change that occurred, whether it is positive or negative (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012). As a monitoring method, outcome harvesting takes stock of what changes (i.e., outcomes) have occurred on a routine basis—creating a clearer picture of when and how an intervention contributed to that change.

When Should You Use Outcome Harvesting?

Outcome harvesting is well suited for complex interventions, or for components of them. Interventions may be socially complex in that there is little agreement on how to address a problem or technically complex in that there is uncertainty about the resources, strategies, or skills needed to address a problem (United Nations Development Programme, 2013). Outcome harvesting has been implemented in a range of complex interventions, including advocacy-strengthening, systems-strengthening for policy change, and more recently, capacity-strengthening for social and behavior change (Rassman et al., 2013; The World Bank, 2014; United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2013; Health Communication Capacity Collaborative [HC3], 2016a; HC3, 2016b; HC3, 2016c).

Table 1: Deciding when to use outcome harvesting

USE OUTCOME HARVESTING	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are multiple or undetermined pathways for change (i.e., theories of change) at the onset of program activity (USAID, 2013).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There is a single clearly defined theory of change that can be traced from the onset of program activity.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are no reliable quantitative indicators of program process and effects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reliable quantitative indicators of program processes and effects are available.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Multiple stakeholders are involved at some level in decision making about the program (Rassman et al., 2013).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participants are not open to discussing negative outcomes as well as positive ones (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012).
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Partner organizations are available and motivated to participate in the evaluation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Partner organizations and other stakeholders cannot participate in an evaluation.



There are six essential steps to outcome harvesting (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012):

1. **Design the outcome harvesting scope and plan**—The monitoring team works collaboratively with stakeholders (e.g., local program staff) to define the monitoring focus of interest, determine scope of outcomes to collect, and finalize data collection instruments. This step also determines the key individuals to engage—those most-knowledgeable about the intervention/implementation context.
2. **Review documentation and draft outcome descriptions**—The monitoring team reviews existing documentation and draft potential outcomes. The monitoring team then composes preliminary descriptions for each outcome, detailing who did what, when, and where.
3. **Engage knowledgeable individuals to finalize outcomes**—The monitoring team works directly with the knowledgeable individuals (identified in Step 1 above) to review and revise the preliminary outcome descriptions and formulate additional ones—ending with a finalized set of outcomes.
4. **Validate outcomes**—The monitoring team reaches out to specific individuals to obtain their assessment about whether or not outcomes are externally valid—namely whether the claim is credible that the intervention influenced the outcomes.
5. **Analyze and interpret**—The monitoring team organizes and analyzes outcome descriptions. They work together with stakeholders to identify and interpret patterns and findings.
6. **Support use of findings**—The monitoring team shares the results of their harvest(s) with stakeholders and facilitates a discussion about next steps.



- Allows users to capture both intended and unintended changes to which an intervention contributed.
- Engages stakeholders in a participatory process.
- Utilizes existing data sources, avoiding the need to collect additional data.
- Can shed light on the process of how changes occurred.
- Can be implemented through multiple approaches, including face-to-face, phone, and online.

WEAKNESSES

- Requires skill and time to identify and formulate high-quality outcome descriptions.
- Captures only outcomes that informants are aware of.
- Requires a high level of commitment from programmatic staff and those knowledgeable about outcomes.
- Monitoring teams have little or no control over data quality and data validation checks.

Ethical Considerations

Since outcome harvesting relies on existing documentation as its primary data source, ethical considerations are minimal. At the same time, if any of the existing data originates from human beings (e.g., emails from particular individuals, transcripts from political speeches, summary clinic data reports,

and meeting attendance records), it is critical to ensure the use of that data is handled in a secure and confidential manner. In addition, when validating outcomes, the monitoring team will engage with individuals to assess their opinions about the credibility of specific outcomes. Although these individuals are not asked to share personal information about themselves, it is important they consent to participate and understand the reason(s) they are being asked to participate, the way in which their information will be collected and shared, and the related potential benefits and risks. The monitoring team may want to reach out and consult with their institutional review board, if one is available, to further discuss ethical considerations.

Resources

[What is Outcome Harvesting?](#)

This three-minute video explains the basic concepts of outcome harvesting.

[Outcome Harvesting](#)

This white paper presents an extended and detailed explanation of outcome harvesting and the steps needed to properly execute it.

[Outcome Harvesting Website](#)

This website developed by Wilson-Grau Associates provides an array of resources to support and develop outcome harvesting practitioners.

References

Gold, J., Wilson-Grau, R., Fisher, S. (2014). Cases in outcome harvesting: Ten pilot experiences identify new learning from multi-stakeholder projects to improve results. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.

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