Part 1: Overview

A. Introduction

On April 3, 2014, Ricardo Wilson-Grau gave a presentation on the evaluation methodology “Outcome Harvesting,” and how outcome harvesting can be a particularly useful methodology for evaluating peacebuilding projects. Outcome Harvesting requires a paradigm shift away from the traditional linear trajectory of monitoring & evaluation (M&E). Traditionally, an organization at the planning stages of a project determines what outcomes they want their project to contribute to, and then works to see if they are doing what they set out to do, if their activities are accomplishing their outputs, and if the outputs are leading to the outcomes. This can be very difficult for organizations working in complex environments, where circumstances can change quickly, and projects must be able to adapt.

In Outcome Harvesting, an organization begins with resources, plans activities based on the context, adapting overtime as need be, and at the end determines what outcomes have emerged, and then works backwards to determine whether and how the project or intervention contributed to the change. In this context, an outcome is defined as a change in behavior, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or institution. It is a participatory form of M&E that enables users to identify, verify, and make sense of outcomes with or without reference to predetermined objectives.

The resources mentioned in the talk can be accessed through the following links:

- World Bank Institute (WBI) teams piloted a customized version of Outcome Harvesting in 2013, and as a result, WBI now lists the tool amongst its resources for M&E. Examples of the pilots can be found at: [www.outcomemapping.ca](http://www.outcomemapping.ca)

- UNDP evaluation office 2013 discussion paper that selected Outcome Harvesting as one of eleven promising innovations in M&E practices: [https://undp.unteamworks.org/node/370238](https://undp.unteamworks.org/node/370238)

- USAID 2013 discussion note on Complexity-Aware Monitoring that chose Outcome Harvesting as one of five approaches especially well-suited for evaluation practitioners operating in dynamic, uncertain situations who need tools to monitor and evaluate the change and results they are achieving through interventions where relations of cause and effect are not fully understood: [http://usaidlearninglab.org/library/discussion-note-complexity-aware-monitoring](http://usaidlearninglab.org/library/discussion-note-complexity-aware-monitoring)

Part 2: Question & Answer

The following includes the questions posed during the Thursday Talk, and a summary of the answers. For Ricardo’s full responses, please listen to the recording.

1. **Biggest challenge**: What is the most difficult part of Outcome Harvesting?
   **Ricardo Wilson-Grau**: The most difficult part is the paradigm shift required, of not starting out with a conventional M&E plan that says “let’s see if we did what we said we would do.” When using Outcome Harvesting, at the moment of project planning, you recognize that you don’t know
what you are going to achieve, or even perhaps exactly what you will do. Instead, Outcome Harvesting says “let’s figure out what changes you think you affected, and then investigate how your project or intervention affected those changes.”

2. **Adopting Outcome Harvesting**: What advice do you have for someone who is trying to convince others that they should switch to using Outcome Harvesting to monitor and evaluate their projects or interventions?

   **Ricardo Wilson-Grau**: What helps most is to model the results that Outcome Harvesting allows you to achieve. For example, demonstrate from a report that your organization or partners have done, and show what information about outcomes is included in the report, and how Outcome Harvesting could add to that understanding. Oftentimes, a report will say that there were such and such “potential” or “suggested” outcomes from a project, but Outcome Harvesting can take this a step farther by validating a project’s or intervention’s contribution to an outcome. The focus is on understanding what people are doing that shows that they have changed, and whether/how your project has contributed to this change. The same template can be used to convince a donor to accept Outcome Harvesting as an appropriate methodology for evaluating projects it funds; the modelling of what Outcome Harvesting can do is very important, as is using examples from the donor’s own experience.

3. **Determining significance**: How do you determine the significance of an intervention’s contribution to the outcome?

   **Ricardo Wilson-Grau**: When defining the Terms of Reference or the scope of work for an Outcome Harvesting evaluation, you work with the organization to determine what they understand to be significant. Determining what they would consider significant and what significance means during the preliminary stages enables you to select which outcomes would be the most useful to investigate.

4. **Positive vs. negative change**: Does Outcome Harvesting enable you to measure potential negative changes that have occurred from a project?

   **Ricardo Wilson-Grau**: Measuring negative change or no change is definitely a challenge. There are different ways changes could be seen as negative or no change. For example, if you stopped something from happening, such as stopped a law from being passed, then that’s technically an outcome that signifies no change. Or, if you’re getting a result you didn’t want, such as a backlash against your campaign, then that’s a negative outcome, and you would want to understand why the backlash is occurring. So, there are negative outcomes that are very important to understand. Often, people do focus on the positive outcomes, but it’s important to take time to think, “Ok, we’ve identified five positive outcomes, now let’s see whether there are any negative outcomes.”

5. **Unintended outcomes**: Have you had an experience where the outcomes actually achieved are very different than the outcomes originally sought? What were the implications with partners, donors, etc.?

   **Ricardo Wilson-Grau**: Outcome Harvesting is especially useful for identifying and understanding unintended outcomes. For organizations working in highly uncertain contexts, where they know that what they hoped to affect may be only part of what their project does, Outcome Harvesting is incredibly useful as it doesn’t limit you to only measuring what you set out to achieve, but by looking first at what was achieved, highlights unexpected outcomes as well as expected outcomes, and then enables you to determine the contribution your organization’s project or intervention had in affecting those changes.

6. **Comparing methodologies**: Could you compare outcome harvesting to contribution analysis and process tracing?

   **Ricardo Wilson-Grau**: I haven’t worked with contribution analysis or process tracing, so I can’t really compare them, I’m afraid.

7. **Learning process**: It seems that education is a large component in Outcome Harvesting processes; you have to educate donors, partners, colleagues, etc. How does writing a report for Outcome Harvesting differ, based on all this need for education, from traditional M&E?
Ricardo Wilson-Grau: I consider it coaching. When I do an evaluation, I am the “methodologist,” and I work with a content or thematic expert or two. Thus, the coaching begins with them. You learn how to apply this tool by doing it, and it is very important to have support while starting to use the tool. So as you go through the process, you coach the people you work with, to help them determine the outcomes that have occurred and which they believe they may have affected. The next step is to design the questions for the harvest. When designing questions, it is important to first determine what you should report on, in order for the report to be most useful. Understanding the purpose and intended use of a report is critical when designing the questions, as the questions will shape the harvest. Everything you learn during a process of Outcome Harvesting cannot be included in a report. Thus, it is very important that in Outcome Harvesting, the “harvester” is included in the discussions of the report beyond its initial completion. This is another break from traditional M&E, but it is very useful to include the harvester in the discussions of what changes to implement based on the results of your harvest.

8. **Defining evidence:** What kind of evidence is considered reliable and/or sufficient?

Ricardo Wilson-Grau: The outcomes are the evidence; who changed what, where, and the contribution. Both the changes and contribution must be clear and plausible, and then the next step is justification, to verify the content of all or some of the outcomes. This is done in the substantiation phase. Sometimes, depending on the intended use of the report, there is no need for substantiation; it depends on the purpose of the report and what would be useful. Sometimes, donors will request extra substantiation of certain outcomes, if they feel they are questionable.

9. **Lack of substantiation:** What do you do if one party says “this happened because of X,” while another says “No, this happened because of Y”?

Ricardo Wilson-Grau: Almost all outcomes are substantiated, meaning that they are confirmed or partially confirmed. Authorities almost always say, “yes, this organization contributed to this outcome,” or “yes, this organization contributed to this outcome, but this also occurred…” I would guess only about 7% of outcomes aren’t substantiated, and what to do with unsubstantiated outcomes depends on what would be useful. You can either take out the outcome, or add the information in as additional information to the outcomes.

10. **Ineffective interventions:** What happens if change occurs, but the intervention didn’t contribute? How is that determined?

Ricardo Wilson-Grau: Generally, if an intervention didn’t contribute to an outcome, this would come out during the substantiation phase, and the outcome wouldn’t be considered substantiated. As a note, in Outcome Harvesting, we are always talking about contribution, not attribution. Part of the process involves asking an organization, “how did you contribute? Who did you collaborate with?” or “Who else contributed and how did they contribute?” Then, you can ask the other collaborators or influencers, and they are well placed to substantiate an outcome.