

Systemic Outcomes Harvesting

Introduction

Systemic Outcomes Harvesting is an enhanced monitoring and evaluation approach that combines Outcome Harvesting methodology with systems thinking principles to capture, analyze, and learn from emergent, unexpected, and nonlinear outcomes in peacebuilding interventions. This approach recognizes that in complex conflict systems, change rarely follows predictable, linear pathways from activities to outcomes. Instead, multiple factors interact to create both anticipated and unanticipated results through feedback loops, time delays, and emergent properties.

This template provides peacebuilders with a structured process to:

- Identify significant changes that have occurred in conflict systems
- Determine how interventions contributed to these changes
- Understand the systemic patterns and relationships behind outcomes
- Adapt strategies based on emergent learning
- Document evidence of impact in complex environments

Key Concepts

Traditional Outcome Harvesting Elements

- **Outcomes:** Observable changes in behavior, relationships, actions, policies, or practices
- **Contribution Analysis:** Plausible connections between interventions and outcomes
- **Substantiation:** Verification of outcomes through multiple sources
- **Utilization Focus:** Emphasis on useful findings for improved practice

Systems Enhancement Elements

- **Feedback Loops:** How outcomes create conditions that amplify or diminish further change
- **Ripple Effects:** How changes spread through interconnected system elements
- **Emergence:** Outcomes that arise from system interactions rather than direct causation
- **Non-linearity:** Disproportionate relationships between interventions and outcomes
- **Time Delays:** Gaps between actions and their full effects

Systemic Harvesting Process

Phase 1: Preparation and Design

Step 1: Define Harvesting Questions

- Identify specific learning questions that will guide the harvesting process
- Consider both accountability needs and adaptive learning purposes
- Include questions about system dynamics and patterns, not just individual outcomes
- Engage stakeholders in developing and prioritizing questions

Example Harvesting Questions:

- "What changes in relationships between conflict parties have emerged during the project period?"

- "How have interventions influenced key feedback loops in the conflict system?"
- "What unexpected outcomes have emerged, and what system dynamics produced them?"
- "How have outcomes spread beyond immediate stakeholders to affect the broader system?"

Step 2: Map the System

- Create a baseline map of the conflict system showing key elements and relationships
- Identify dominant feedback loops, critical stocks, and potential leverage points
- Document initial hypotheses about how interventions might influence the system
- Include diverse stakeholder perspectives in the mapping process

Example Mapping Approaches:

- Collaborative causal loop diagramming with program stakeholders
- Influence maps showing relationships between key actors
- Stock-flow analysis of critical conflict-related resources
- Iceberg analysis to identify underlying structures and mental models

Step 3: Develop Harvesting Framework

- Create outcome description templates that include systemic elements
- Establish methods for data collection appropriate to context
- Determine substantiation approaches for verifying outcomes
- Design analysis frameworks for identifying patterns and system insights
- Plan for participation of diverse stakeholders throughout the process

Phase 2: Data Collection

Step 4: Gather Outcome Descriptions

- Collect detailed descriptions of observable changes from multiple sources
- Document both expected and unexpected outcomes
- Include information about timing, sequence, and context
- Capture stakeholder interpretations of significance and contribution
- Use culturally appropriate methods to ensure inclusive documentation

Data Collection Methods:

- Key informant interviews with diverse stakeholders
- Focus group discussions with affected communities
- Review of documents, media reports, and monitoring data
- Participatory workshops with implementing teams
- Direct observation in conflict contexts
- Digital platforms for remote input where appropriate

Step 5: Draft Outcome Statements

For each identified change, document:

- **What changed:** The observable behavior, relationship, action, or practice
- **Who changed:** The actors who demonstrated the change
- **When/where:** The timing and context of the change
- **Significance:** Why this change matters for peace

- **Contribution:** How interventions influenced the change
- **Systemic connections:** How this outcome relates to other system elements
- **Evidence sources:** References to verify the outcome

Example Outcome Statement Format: "[Who] changed [what] in [when/where]. This matters because [significance]. Our contribution to this change involved [intervention activities]. This outcome connects to the wider system through [systemic relationships]. Evidence for this outcome comes from [sources]."

Step 6: Substantiate Outcomes

- Verify outcome statements through multiple independent sources
- Test contribution claims against alternative explanations
- Engage both supporters and skeptics in review processes
- Consider credibility needs of different stakeholders
- Maintain documentation of verification processes

Phase 3: Systemic Analysis

Step 7: Categorize and Organize Outcomes

- Group outcomes by themes, system areas, or stakeholder groups
- Create timelines showing sequence and potential relationships
- Map outcomes onto the system diagram created in Step 2
- Identify clusters and patterns across multiple outcomes
- Note outcomes that occurred at different system levels

Example Categorization Frameworks:

- By system level: Individual, relationship, community, institutional, structural
- By outcome type: Behavioral, policy, capacity, relationship, narrative
- By program objectives: Aligned vs. emergent outcomes
- By stakeholder group: Who experienced or led the change
- By system area: Which part of the conflict system was affected

Step 8: Analyze Systemic Patterns

- Identify feedback loops connecting multiple outcomes
- Map ripple effects showing how changes spread through the system
- Analyze time delays between interventions and outcomes
- Recognize emergent patterns that weren't part of original theories of change
- Assess how outcomes interact with key leverage points in the system

Key Analytical Questions:

- What reinforcing or balancing feedback loops appear in the outcomes?
- Which outcomes represent first-order effects vs. secondary or tertiary effects?
- Where did small inputs create large outcomes (or vice versa)?
- How did outcomes in one system area affect other areas?
- What new system elements or relationships emerged during the process?

Step 9: Synthesize System Insights

- Develop key insights about how the system responded to interventions

- Compare findings to initial theories of change and system hypotheses
- Identify both successful and unsuccessful influence strategies
- Document lessons about leverage points and intervention timing
- Capture emerging theories about system behavior and change pathways

Phase 4: Learning and Adaptation

Step 10: Share and Validate Findings

- Present systemic analysis to stakeholders for feedback
- Create accessible visualizations of system changes and patterns
- Facilitate collective sense-making about findings
- Incorporate diverse interpretations into final analysis
- Document remaining questions and areas of uncertainty

Step 11: Generate Adaptive Strategies

- Identify implications for future intervention strategies
- Develop recommendations for working with key feedback loops
- Suggest approaches for addressing emerging barriers or opportunities
- Create adaptive management processes based on new system understanding
- Design next-phase monitoring to track system evolution

Step 12: Document and Disseminate Learning

- Create appropriate knowledge products for different audiences
- Share methodological insights for future harvesting processes
- Contribute to broader field knowledge about systems change in conflict
- Establish ongoing learning mechanisms to continue tracking system evolution
- Link findings to wider peacebuilding evidence base

Systemic Harvesting Worksheets

Worksheet 1: Outcome Description Template

| Element | Description | Guiding Questions |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| What Changed | Observable change in behavior, relationships, actions, policy, or practice | What is different now compared to before? What can be observed by others? |
| Who Changed | Actors demonstrating the change | Which individuals, groups, institutions, or networks acted differently? |
| When/Where | Timing and context | When did the change occur? In what context or location? |
| Significance | Importance for peace | Why does this change matter for peace processes? How does it address conflict dynamics? |
| Contribution | How interventions influenced the change | What activities or approaches contributed to this outcome? Through what mechanisms? |
| Systemic Connections | Relationships to other system elements | How does this outcome connect to other parts of the conflict system? What feedback loops is it part of? |
| Evidence Sources | References to verify the outcome | What sources can confirm this outcome? What documentation exists? |

Worksheet 2: System Mapping Update

Initial System Map Date: [When the original system map was created]

Update Based on Harvested Outcomes:

| System Element | Initial State | Current State | Outcomes Related to This Change | System Implications |
|----------------|---------------|---------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |

New System Elements Identified:

- [Element 1] - Connected to outcomes: [list relevant outcomes]
- [Element 2] - Connected to outcomes: [list relevant outcomes]

Changed Feedback Loops:

- [Loop 1] - How it changed: [description of change] - Related outcomes: [list]
- [Loop 2] - How it changed: [description of change] - Related outcomes: [list]

Worksheet 3: Outcome Pattern Analysis

Pattern Category 1: [Name]

- Description: [What characterizes this pattern]
- Related Outcomes: [List of outcomes showing this pattern]
- System Dynamics: [Feedback loops, delays, or emergence features]

- Implications: [What this pattern suggests for future strategies]

Pattern Category 2: [Name]

- Description: [What characterizes this pattern]
- Related Outcomes: [List of outcomes showing this pattern]
- System Dynamics: [Feedback loops, delays, or emergence features]
- Implications: [What this pattern suggests for future strategies]

Worksheet 4: Strategic Learning Summary

Key System Insights:

1. [Insight 1]
2. [Insight 2]
3. [Insight 3]

Revised Understanding of Change Pathways:

- Original assumption: [Description]
- New understanding: [Description]
- Evidence supporting this revision: [Outcomes and patterns]

Implications for Strategy:

- Continue: [Approaches that worked as expected]
- Adapt: [Approaches that need modification]
- Discontinue: [Approaches that didn't work as intended]
- Explore: [New approaches suggested by findings]

Monitoring Adaptations:

- New elements to track: [List]
- Modified indicators: [List]
- Different data collection methods: [List]

Case Example: Community Dialogue Program

Context

A three-year community dialogue program in a post-conflict setting aimed to rebuild relationships between previously conflicting ethnic groups. The program implemented dialogue circles, joint economic projects, and youth peace clubs in 12 communities.

Sample Harvested Outcomes

Outcome 1: "Village council members from Eastville and Westville (formerly opposing communities) jointly approached the district government in March 2023 to request infrastructure funding, using skills from dialogue sessions to present a unified proposal. This matters because it represents the first collaborative governance initiative between these communities in 15 years. Our contribution included facilitating monthly dialogue sessions and providing proposal writing training. This outcome connects to broader governance systems by creating a new pattern of collaborative resource advocacy. Evidence comes from meeting minutes, the joint proposal document, and interviews with council members."

Outcome 2: "Youth from three ethnic groups spontaneously formed a 'peace market' WhatsApp group in August 2023 to share information about prices and coordinate transportation to weekly markets. This matters because it demonstrates youth-led economic cooperation across conflict lines. While our youth peace clubs contributed to relationship-building, this specific initiative was not directly facilitated by our program. This outcome connects to economic systems and communication networks in the region. Evidence includes WhatsApp group messages, interviews with youth participants, and market vendor testimonials."

Outcome 3: "Community radio stations in six project areas began broadcasting weekly 'dialogue stories' programs in local languages by December 2023, featuring testimonials from dialogue participants. This matters because it extends dialogue impacts beyond direct participants. Our contribution included providing initial testimonial training, though the ongoing programming was locally initiated and led. This connects to information systems and narrative change in the broader conflict context. Evidence includes program recordings, listener feedback, and interviews with radio station managers."

Sample System Pattern Analysis

Pattern: Emerging Communication Bridges

- **Description:** New communication channels developing independently between groups, often using technology or informal networks
- **Related Outcomes:** Youth WhatsApp market group; Inter-village sports tournament organizing committee; Religious leader phone tree system
- **System Dynamics:** Creates reinforcing feedback loop where successful communication in one domain encourages attempts in other domains; Bypasses formal structures that previously controlled inter-group contact
- **Implications:** Support emerging communication channels with technical resources rather than trying to initiate new ones; Monitor potential backlash from those who lose control/influence

Pattern: Delayed Institutional Adoption

- **Description:** 12-18 month lag between community-level relationship changes and formal institutional cooperation
- **Related Outcomes:** Joint village council infrastructure proposal; School system adoption of peace curriculum; Religious coordination committee formation
- **System Dynamics:** Shows time delay between individual/relationship changes and institutional changes; Requires critical mass of relationship changes before institutional shift occurs
- **Implications:** Plan for longer timeframes for institutional outcomes; Identify "institutional champions" who can accelerate adoption

Strategic Learning Example

Key System Insight: Informal economic cooperation emerged as a more powerful connector between groups than the planned cultural activities, creating multiple reinforcing feedback loops that accelerated relationship building.

Revised Understanding:

- Original assumption: Shared cultural activities would build foundations for later economic cooperation
- New understanding: Economic interests provided immediate common ground that created willingness to engage in deeper cultural sharing

- Evidence: Spontaneous economic initiatives preceded increased participation in cultural events; Cross-group business relationships formed faster than predicted

Strategy Implication: Future programming should lead with practical economic cooperation activities while weaving in cultural elements, rather than treating economic cooperation as a later-stage intervention.

Implementation Considerations

Adaptation for Different Contexts

Low-Resource Settings

- Focus on fewer, more significant outcomes rather than comprehensive harvesting
- Use participatory visual methods to document system relationships
- Integrate harvesting with existing community gathering and reflection practices
- Simplify documentation while maintaining systemic analysis elements

High-Conflict Environments

- Ensure data collection methods don't increase security risks
- Use indirect harvesting approaches where direct questioning might be sensitive
- Create safe spaces for diverse perspectives on outcomes
- Consider confidentiality needs while maintaining analytical integrity

Diverse Cultural Contexts

- Adapt language and concepts to reflect local understanding of change
- Incorporate indigenous knowledge systems into system mapping
- Use culturally appropriate methods for sharing and validating findings
- Recognize different cultural perceptions of time, causality, and evidence

Common Challenges

Political Sensitivity

- Balance transparency with conflict sensitivity
- Consider who benefits from different interpretations of outcomes
- Manage expectations about attribution and contribution
- Develop strategies for sharing politically sensitive findings

Complexity Management

- Avoid overwhelming detail while capturing system complexity
- Develop clear frameworks for prioritizing which outcomes to substantiate deeply
- Create accessible visualizations of system relationships
- Balance complexity for learning with simplicity for communication

Participation and Inclusion

- Ensure marginalized voices contribute to outcome identification
- Address power dynamics in the harvesting process itself
- Create multiple channels for stakeholder input
- Validate findings with diverse stakeholders

Integration with Other Systems Tools

Complementary Approaches

- **Theory of Change Development:** Informs initial system mapping and learning questions
- **Causal Loop Diagramming:** Visualizes relationships between outcomes and system elements
- **Stock and Flow Analysis:** Quantifies changes in key resources or capacities
- **Scenario Planning:** Helps interpret harvested outcomes for future planning
- **Social Network Analysis:** Tracks relationship changes identified through harvesting

Integration Points

- Use system maps from other tools to inform harvesting frameworks
- Feed harvested outcomes into updated systems models
- Combine insights from harvesting with leverage point identification
- Use outcomes to test and refine conflict system archetypes
- Integrate harvesting into adaptive management cycles

Conclusion

Systemic Outcomes Harvesting provides peacebuilders with a powerful approach to understanding, documenting, and learning from complex change processes in conflict environments. By combining the outcome-focused methods of traditional harvesting with systems thinking's attention to relationships, feedback, and emergence, practitioners can develop more nuanced understanding of how their interventions interact with conflict systems.

This approach moves beyond simplistic linear models of change to recognize the dynamic, unpredictable nature of peacebuilding work. By systematically collecting evidence of actual changes while analyzing the patterns and relationships between them, Systemic Outcomes Harvesting helps build both evidence for effectiveness and adaptive capacity for future programming.

The ultimate value of this approach lies not just in documenting what has changed, but in deepening understanding of how change happens in complex conflict systems, thereby enabling more effective, responsive peacebuilding strategies.

Additional Resources

- Wilson-Grau, R. (2015). *Outcome Harvesting*
- Meadows, D. (2008). *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*
- CDA Collaborative Learning Projects. (2016). *Reflecting on Peace Practice Program*
- USAID. (2016). *Complexity-Aware Monitoring Discussion Note*
- Burns, D. & Worsley, S. (2015). *Navigating Complexity in International Development*