## What is Outcome Harvesting?

***Outcome Harvesting***[[1]](#footnote-0) is a method for evaluators, grant makers, managers, etc. to understand and validate outcomes in a program or initiative. It focuses on changes in behavior, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of individuals, groups, communities, organizations, or institutions.

Using this approach, information is gathered from reports, interviews, and other sources to document how a program contributed to outcomes, whether positive or negative, intended or unintended. Unlike some evaluation methods, Outcome Harvesting doesn't measure progress towards predetermined outcomes; instead, it collects evidence of what has been achieved and works backward to understand the project's contribution to it. This method is comparable to hard sciences, where evidence is collected to interpret events leading to a specific outcome. Information is harvested from individuals or organizations influencing the outcomes, and a validation process compares it with data from independent sources. The substantiated information is then analyzed at the individual or group level to describe outcomes that contribute to overall mission, goals, or strategies.

## When is Outcome Harvesting useful?

Outcome Harvesting (OH) is incredibly powerful in bringing the changes out in the center, and considers multi-dimensional impacts of a particular activity or programme. The suitability of such an activity also depends on the purpose of the assessment and utilization of the results. OH should particularly be considered when:

* The focus is more on outcomes rather than the activities, i.e., when we want to learn more about what has actually been achieved rather than how the implementation is being done. It is incredibly useful in understanding ***the process of change*** and how each outcome ***contributes to this change***.
* Under ***complex programming scenarios***, where the cause-effect relationships are not fully understood. In traditional monitoring and evaluation, the focus is on comparing planned outcomes with actual achievements. However, in complex environments, objectives and the paths to achieve them are unpredictable, and predefined goals and theories of change need modification over time to adapt to contextual changes. Outcome Harvesting becomes particularly valuable in such situations, especially when the ***goal is to comprehend how individual outcomes contribute to broader system-wide changes*.**
* It can be combined with other monitoring and evaluation methods to create a more comprehensive understanding of the process of change, and utilized for formative as well as summative evaluations

| **Strengths** | **Limitations** |
| --- | --- |
| Captures unintended results | Requires time and skill |
| Verifiable harvested outcomes | Dependent on informants’ awareness |
| Can use multiple approaches; easy engagement with informants | Requires participation from change agents |
| Detailed | New way of thinking |

In the context of programs funded by this specific grant, where: a) multiple partners work in the same focus areas, employing various strategies towards a common goal, b) partners operate in vulnerable geographies with marginalized populations, highlighting the importance of understanding context and nuances throughout the change process, and c) partners address sensitive themes where capturing unintended (negative) outcomes is crucial – Outcome Harvesting can prove to be particularly beneficial in achieving the collective objectives of this initiative. Our aim is to define and detail outcomes for each partner, specify their significance in the broader theory of change, and outline the partner's contribution to the overall change. This exercise not only helps identify additional outcomes but also allows for updates to the existing Theory of Change (TOC) framework.

## What are the key steps involved in harvesting an outcome?

1. **Design the Outcome Harvest**: Harvest users and harvesters work together to figure out important questions and agree on what information to collect, including the outcome description and details about changes in social actors and the impact of the change agent's actions.
2. **Check documents and write outcome descriptions:** Harvesters go through reports, evaluations, and press releases to find evidence of changes in individuals, groups, communities, organizations, or institutions. They also note down what actions the change agents took to bring about these changes.
3. **Talk to informants about outcome descriptions**: Harvesters have direct conversations with change agent informants to review the outcome descriptions, find more outcomes, and sort them into categories. Informants often check with others who know about the outcomes they contributed to.
4. **Substantiate**: Harvesters get opinions from independent individuals who know about the outcomes or a group of outcomes. This makes the findings more trustworthy and credible.
5. **Analyse and Interpret**: Harvesters organize the outcome descriptions in a database, analyze the data, and give evidence-based answers to the important harvesting questions.
6. **Help use the findings:** Harvesters suggest discussion points based on evidence for harvest users. Discussions may involve figuring out how users can use the findings. Harvesters finish their role by guiding discussions among harvest users.

The **goal** of this workshop is to introduce the outcome harvesting process, with a particular focus on detailing the outcomes for each partner, and their contribution towards the same. In order to do that effectively, it is important to understand what is an outcome and what is not, and how to describe in the required amount of detail.

## What is an outcome?

An ‘outcome’ is when another social actor – an individual, group or community, organization, institution – makes an observable, verifiable change in behaviour, relationships, actions, activities, agendas, policies or practices that were influenced, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally. Note that new knowledge or mindset change is not an outcome in itself. When someone uses that new knowledge or attitude to do something different, that ***observable behaviour change is the outcome.***

## How are outcomes defined?

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 becomes 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.

Keeping in mind these features, outcomes need to be defined following a few key steps:

### Detailing the outcome

* When did the change in the social actor take place?
* Where did the change take place?
* Who is the social actor? - and
* What did the social actor do differently?

For example, an outcome description for a programme focusing on alternate livelihood planning for farmer households would be: [WHEN] in January 2024, [WHERE] in the beneficiary village ABC, [WHO] 10 beneficiary households were able to [WHAT] formulate and execute an alternate livelihood activity for their households.

### Describing the Significance

The significance statement describes the nature of the outcome, and why it is relevant for the organisation’s theory of change. It is based on interpretation and sensemaking, and requires introspection on how a given programme activity is working in the way one would hope it does.

In practice, once the outcome is detailed, one needs to ask:

* Is it a positive or negative outcome?
* From the programme’s point of view, why is this outcome significant or worth noting in the current context? Is it a turning point? Is it a set-back? Is it the first time? Is it a step forward in the hoped-for outcomes over time?

In terms of the example outcome stated above:

* It is a positive outcome.
* It is worth noting as the theory of change envisages handholding and planning support provided under the programme to increase the planning and adoption of alternate livelihoods, improving income stability, and ultimately household resilience to economic shocks.

Significance, is highly based on judgement and, and aims to help interpret the relevance of the organization or programme’s strategic objectives in a particular context.

### Describing Programme’s Contribution

‘Contribution’ refers to what the programme or related people have done to influence the described outcome / change. Assessing contribution urges one to explore - 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?

While determining your (organization’s) contribution to the outcome, one should think through the following details

* When did you (or actors from the organization) influence the outcomes?
* Where did the person do it?
* Who did that activity?
* What did the person / organization do?

For our example: [WHEN] Over the period of March 2023 to December 2023, [WHO] the implementation team [WHAT] conducted monthly capacity building sessions on alternate livelihood planning [WHERE] in their villages, guiding and handholding through the process of planning and financing, [WHAT], enabling the beneficiary households to develop and execute the alternative livelihood plan.

While detailing the contribution, it is important to keep in mind, that:

* The actor [WHO] in the contribution cannot be the same as the actor in the outcome.
* One may need to describe multiple activities that together influenced the outcome.
* Other actors may have played a key role in influencing the outcome, which needs to be included in the description.

## Tips

While considering and describing outcomes, there are certain things to keep in mind:

* Focus more on who has changed, not on what was provided through the programme
* Provide specific information rather than generalization
* The outcome must have taken place after the contribution.
* If the actors are different, then specify different outcomes.
* Provide the scope of the outcome – how much, how many?
* If ONE actor makes multiple decisions regarding at the SAME place and time relating to different organizational objectives – that is one outcome and should be noted as such summarizing each decision taken.
* A change in knowledge is not yet an outcome. It only becomes an outcome when the actor uses that knowledge to do something.
* A change in attitude, awareness or perceptions is not yet an outcome – it only becomes an outcome when the actor does something that demonstrates this change.
* When one prevents something from happening, or maintain something that is being threatened – that is an outcome.
* Don’t use acronyms while defining the outcomes which won’t be understood by external audiences.
* Don’t use adverbs or adjectives while defining the activities or outcomes.

An activity worksheet to guide the outcome description process is attached in Appendix 3.

# **Appendix 1**

# **Concepts: Outcome Harvesting**

* **Change Agent**: The individual or organisation that influences an outcome through an intervention
* **Harvest users:** The people who require the findings of an Outcome Harvest to make decisions or take action
* **Harvesters:** People responsible for managing the Outcome Harvest.
* **Outcome:** Change in the behaviour, relationships, actions, activities, policies or practices of a social actor.
* **Outcome Description**: The written formulation of who changed what, when and where, and how it was influenced by a change agent. May include the outcome’s significance, context, and history, amongst other dimensions.
* **Outcome Harvest:** The identification, formulation, analysis and interpretation of outcomes to answer usable questions.
* **Social actor**: Individual, group, community, organisation or institution.
* **Substantiation:** Confirmation of the substance of an Outcome Description by an informant knowledgeable about the outcome but independent of the change agent.
* **Useful questions:** Questions that guide the Outcome Harvest because the answers to them will be put to use by the harvest users.

## Appendix 2

A complete outcome statement has three subcomponents:

1. **Outcome description**: In one sentence, describe the change made by an external social actor (person or institution) that your programme influenced, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, providing only the facts with no value-judgement, no adjectives. This outcome should be verifiable by a third party. You can refer to the following table to draft these outcomes

| Detailing an Outcome | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Sno | WHEN did the social actor change? | WHERE did the change take place? | WHO is the social actor? | WHAT did they do differently? | Description |
|  | Date / Month or Year /  Duration (From Jan ’24 to Mar ’24) | Village? Block? District? Specific event? | Which person or institution is this outcome about? To include – Name, Position, details of institution if individual  If in a group – how many? Specific demographics? | Was it a change in behavior, relationships, actions, activities, agenda, policy or practice?Use the active verb – ‘it or they did what’ | Short, but includes all details specified here |
| 1 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3 |  |  |  |  |  |

1. **Significance of the outcome:** Note down why this change matters in your context in relation to the intended outcomes of your theory of change, and grant level of theory of change. Rather than including factual information, provide your judgements.
2. **Contribution towards the outcome**: Describe what you or your partners did to influence this change (outcome) whether directly or indirectly, intentionally or not. You provide only the facts with no value-judgement, no adjectives, and this statement should also be verifiable by a third party.

| Describing Contribution | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Sno | WHEN did you or another social actor influence the outcome? | WHERE did that person do it? | WHO did that activity? | WHAT did that person or institution do? | Description |
|  | Date / Month or Year /  Duration (From Jan ’24 to Mar ’24) | Village? Block? District? Specific event? | Specify the main contributor to the change first.  Then include all agents who influenced the change | What did the person do that contributed to influencing the actor in the outcome?This could include multiple activitiesUse the active verb – ‘we or they did what’ |  |
| 1 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3 |  |  |  |  |  |

| Frame | Analytical Area | Detailed Analytical Questions |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Frame 1: Outcome Credibility and Completeness Check | Outcome Definition | - Does the outcome clearly identify the social actor (who)?- Is the specific change in behavior, practice, policy, or relationship observable?- Is the timing (when) of the outcome explicitly stated?- Is the location (where) of the outcome clear?- Is the magnitude of change (how much/many) mentioned or verifiable?- Is the organization’s contribution clearly linked and time-bound?- Is the significance of the change explained in relation to program goals?- Are negative outcomes, if any, identified? |
|  | Validation Rigor (SMART-OH) | - Is the outcome Specific (actor, change, time, place)?- Is the outcome Measurable (quantitative/qualitative evidence)?- Is the outcome Achieved (linked to program contribution)?- Is the outcome Relevant to strategic objectives?- Is the outcome Time-bound (within intervention timelines)? |
| Frame 2: Outcome Categorization Matrix | Actor Typology (WHO) | - What type of social actor made the change?- Is it an individual, community, MBO, PRI, government, media, private sector, academic, funder, or other?- Are there patterns across actor types (e.g., government actors showing more change)? |
|  | Nature of Change (WHAT) | - What specific change occurred: behavior, practice, relationship, action, policy, or narrative?- Is the type of change transformative (e.g., systemic), incremental, or exploratory?- Are there emerging change types not previously anticipated? |
|  | Temporal Context (WHEN) | - When did the outcome occur relative to the intervention?- Are outcomes emerging early, mid-term, or late post-intervention?- Do the timelines suggest momentum or delays? |
|  | Spatial Context (WHERE) | - Where did the outcome happen: village, block, district, state, national, international?- Are there concentration or spread patterns across locations? |
|  | Contribution Source | - Which specific intervention or action contributed to the outcome?- Is there evidence of chains or secondary influences? |
| Frame 3: Pattern Analysis Dashboard | Actor Change Analysis | - Which category of social actors are most influenced?- Which are least influenced and why?- Are specific actors key nodes in amplifying change? |
|  | Type of Change Analysis | - What types of changes are predominant (e.g., shifts in practices vs policies)?- Are narrative changes preceding policy changes, or vice versa?- Are there unexpected types of change? |
|  | Geographic Spread Analysis | - Is there a hotspot or cluster of outcomes?- Are certain geographies showing strategic momentum or gaps?- Are interventions in vulnerable or hard-to-reach areas yielding outcomes? |
|  | Timeline Trends | - How quickly are changes happening after interventions?- Are outcomes sustained over time, or are they sporadic?- Is there a pattern of early wins vs longer-term gains? |
|  | Outcome Chains | - Are there multi-actor, sequential influence pathways visible?- Are primary outcomes catalyzing secondary or tertiary changes?- Are any key nodes (actors) critical in chain amplification? |
| Frame 4: Strategic Interpretation Guide | Application of Learning | - How did participants apply what they learned?- Were skills/tools used as intended or adapted differently?- Are adaptations contextually smart or signal design gaps? |
|  | Influence on Others | - Did participants influence others — peers, institutions, communities?- What modes of influence (negotiation, advocacy, training others) are most common?- Are second-level changes visible? |
|  | Strategic Alignment | - Are outcomes aligned with Theory of Change strategic pillars?- Are there outcomes deviating from expected pathways but still valuable?- Are new strategic opportunities emerging? |
|  | Geography and Demographics | - Are certain regions or demographic groups (e.g., women, indigenous communities) seeing stronger outcomes?- Are vulnerabilities being addressed effectively? |
|  | Enabling and Hindering Factors | - What external or internal factors accelerated or impeded outcomes?- What operational lessons emerge for scaling or replication? |
| Frame 5: Research Uptake Outcomes Tracker | Evidence Use by Social Actors | - Are informal workers, MBOs, PRIs using evidence/data strategically?- Is research being cited in negotiations, campaigns, or advocacy? |
|  | Official Recognition | - Are government agencies or courts incorporating program-generated evidence?- Are changes in official statistics visible?- Are there legal, policy, regulatory citations of program data? |
|  | Broader Uptake | - Are private sector, academia, media adopting language, framing, or findings from the program?- Are there indirect or ripple effects of research dissemination? |
|  | Gaps in Research Use | - Are there missed opportunities where research should have been leveraged?- What strategies could strengthen research visibility and adoption? |
| Frame 6: Negative Outcomes Review & Learning | Identification of Negative Outcomes | - Are there observable unintended adverse effects or backlash?- Were these directly caused by interventions, or contextual? |
|  | Attribution and Contribution Analysis | - Is the negative outcome fully or partially attributable to program actions?- Was it foreseeable or genuinely emergent? |
|  | Strategic Implications | - How should the program adapt to mitigate or reverse negative outcomes?- Should new risk management measures be introduced? |
|  | Learning from Failure | - What early warning signs were missed?- How can programming be more adaptive and conflict-sensitive in future? |

| **Frame** | **Analytical Area** | **Underdeveloped**  **Score 0** | **Rudimentary**  **Score 1** | **Emerging**  **Score 2** | **Developed**  **Score 3** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Frame 1: Outcome Credibility and Completeness Check** | Outcome Definition | No WHO/WHAT/WHEN/WHERE provided; only vague statement or output/activity mentioned. | Only 1–2 elements (WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE) weakly present; incomplete or generic. | All 4 elements present but at least one is vague (e.g., approximate timing, general location). | All 4 elements (WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE) clearly, specifically, and verifiably stated. |
|  | Validation Rigor (SMART-OH) | Outcome fails 3 or more SMART criteria (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound). | Outcome meets only 2 SMART criteria partially; lacks clarity or measurable attribution. | Outcome meets 3–4 SMART criteria; moderately clear but missing full measurability or relevance. | Outcome meets all 5 SMART criteria fully: Specific, Measurable, Achieved (with contribution), Relevant (to ToC), and Time-bound. |
| **Frame 2: Outcome Categorization Matrix** | Actor Typology (WHO) | No social actor identified; statement is impersonal or collective. | Actor type inferred but not stated explicitly (e.g., "they" without identification). | Actor type named but category classification (MBO, PRI, etc.) needs external inference. | Actor and exact category (MBO, PRI, Govt., Worker, etc.) clearly named. |
|  | Nature of Change (WHAT) | No behavioral, practice, or policy change described — only activities or intentions. | Generic reference to change (e.g., "improvement") without specifying how or what changed. | Specific but isolated behavior or policy change described; lacking broader significance. | Clear, observable, significant behavior/policy/practice change described that is verifiable and context-specific. |
|  | Temporal Context (WHEN) | No timing mentioned at all. | Only general time frame (e.g., "last year", "recently") mentioned. | Month and year or approximate range mentioned but not precise. | Exact timing (month, year) clearly linked to intervention activities. |
|  | Spatial Context (WHERE) | No mention of location. | Region or state mentioned but not specific to the administrative level. | Block/district or identifiable local area mentioned. | Village/block/district level is precisely stated and relevant to outcome. |
|  | Contribution Source | No contribution from program mentioned; appears spontaneous or external. | Contribution implied but not described clearly (e.g., "after project activities" without which ones). | Contribution described but missing detail of how it led to outcome. | Specific action(s) by project described, linking directly to how outcome was achieved. |
| **Frame 3: Pattern Analysis Dashboard** | Actor Change Analysis | No influence seen or stated. | Influence described but affecting only immediate participants without broader reach. | Some influence seen across community-level or local institutions. | Widespread influence observed across multiple institutions or levels of actors. |
|  | Type of Change Analysis | No type of change identifiable. | Minor changes observed (e.g., attendance, participation) without practice/policy transformation. | Clear behavior/practice changes in target actors but limited in depth. | Substantial systemic shifts in practice, policy, or institutional models clearly linked to interventions. |
|  | Geographic Spread Analysis | Change limited to a single individual or location only. | Outcomes scattered in 1–2 localities but not strategic. | Outcomes seen across multiple localities or districts within a state. | Outcomes replicated across multiple districts/states showing strategic spread. |
|  | Timeline Trends | No discernible pattern; outcomes randomly timed. | Delayed outcomes; significant lag from intervention (12 months+). | Outcomes visible within a reasonable lag (3–12 months post intervention). | Outcomes emerging immediately to 3 months after intervention, showing responsiveness. |
|  | Outcome Chains | No secondary or linked outcomes observed. | One instance of secondary influence linked to initial outcome. | Chain of 2–3 sequential changes observable among different actors. | Chain of 4 or more sequential influences; clear system-level ripple effect visible. |
| **Frame 4: Strategic Interpretation Guide** | Application of Learning | No application of skills/tools/evidence. | Tools used passively or incorrectly; no adaptation. | Tools used in some contexts; adaptation partially visible. | Strategic, context-specific use of tools/skills leading to behavior or practice changes. |
|  | Influence on Others | No ripple or second-level influence observed. | Minimal peer-to-peer sharing or inspiration. | Influence on peers, communities, or institutions visible but sporadic. | Systematic dissemination or scaling observed; multiple actors influenced. |
|  | Strategic Alignment | Outcome unrelated to intended Theory of Change. | Outcome loosely supports ToC goals but with weak causal link. | Outcome supports key ToC pathways; partially fulfilling objectives. | Outcome strongly reinforces ToC strategic pillars; accelerates intended systemic change. |
|  | Geography and Demographics | No geographic or demographic differentiation. | Some outcomes for general population but not vulnerable groups. | Outcomes reaching vulnerable groups but not widespread. | Strong outcome pattern among target vulnerable geographies and marginalized demographics. |
|  | Enabling and Hindering Factors | No contextual enabler or barrier analysis provided. | Some factors named but impact unclear. | Clear factor analysis with moderate link to outcome patterns. | Strong analysis of enabling and hindering factors tied to outcome performance. |
| **Frame 5: Research Uptake Outcomes Tracker** | Evidence Use by Social Actors | No evidence or research cited or used. | Passive or indirect mention of research but no active use. | Active use of research for advocacy or influence in isolated cases. | Systematic, strategic use of research by actors across multiple forums. |
|  | Official Recognition | No official or institutional recognition of evidence. | Informal mentions of research without formal adoption. | Research cited in policy discussions but no formal adoption yet. | Research formally adopted into policies, regulations, or official statistics. |
|  | Broader Uptake | No cross-sector or cross-actor uptake visible. | Uptake by isolated external players (e.g., 1 private sector actor). | Uptake across different sectors (govt., private, academia) partially visible. | Significant multi-sector uptake of research findings/documentation. |
|  | Gaps in Research Use | No reflection on missed research use opportunities. | Some missed opportunities casually mentioned. | Identified missed opportunities with partial corrective steps suggested. | Full reflection on missed use cases with clear actionable strategies for future uptake. |
| **Frame 6: Negative Outcomes Review & Learning** | Identification of Negative Outcomes | No negative outcomes recognized or documented. | Negative effects casually mentioned without exploration. | Negative outcomes described with partial analysis. | Comprehensive documentation of negative outcomes with causes and early signs identified. |
|  | Attribution and Contribution Analysis | No attempt to attribute responsibility for negative outcomes. | Attribution attempted but loosely explained. | Clear but partial attribution to program/contextual factors. | Full attribution explaining root causes, actor roles, and interaction with external factors. |
|  | Strategic Implications | No changes or adjustments suggested. | Minor recommendations suggested without strategic link. | Partial adjustments recommended tied to limited learning. | Clear, actionable recommendations proposed to redesign strategy based on learning. |
|  | Learning from Failure | No structured learning from failure captured. | Anecdotal learning captured but not integrated into planning. | Lessons captured and partially influencing adjustments. | Deep learning captured and fully integrated into adaptation planning for future interventions. |

1. Key concepts related to outcome harvesting have been added in the appendix for reference. For a more detailed reading on Outcome Harvesting, please refer to: [Outcome Harvesting (May 2012, Revised November 2013),](https://www.outcomemapping.ca/download/wilsongrau_en_Outome%20Harvesting%20Brief_revised%20Nov%202013.pdf) Ricardo Wilson Grau, Heather Bitt [↑](#footnote-ref-0)