The significance of outcomes in Outcome Harvesting
Julius Nyangaga, Right Track Africa
12Nov 2021

Summary
A complete outcome statement is composed of three factors: the observed change, its significance, and the intervening project's contribution. A consensus on the source of data (or evidence) for these results is important. However, 'significance' is a value judgment and, unless guided by a basis on what it should be made, can be subjective, depending on who is asking, who is responding, and what they value at that time of the evaluation. This paper is a brief review of what is meant by significance in outcome harvesting (OH) guidebooks, how it has been used in case reports, and how it can be made more instructive and less subjective.

A guide for describing an outcome's significance should be prepared (beforehand, during the inception dialogues) to guide data collection and analysis. This paper shows why and how it can be based on the evaluation uses, OECD criteria, the project's objectives, theory of change, outcome types or emerging themes and progress markers, the magnitude or intensity of change, and/or the project's comparative contribution to the transformation

A recommendation for the structure of outcome harvesting statements or databases is to use '*Who changed how*' + '*Project contribution*' + '*Significance of the change*'. Data from agreed significance fields can then be extracted for analyses that serve the evaluation or harvest objectives.

**** " " ****

Discussion
'Outcome Harvesting' (OH) sounds simple but the process goes beyond simply identifying and listing a project's outcomes. According to the method's guidebooks, (Wilson-Grau & Britt, 2012; Wilson-Grau, 2019); the harvested outcomes should answer particular evaluation questions. These answers inform the intended uses of the outcome harvest (or evaluation).

The OH guidebooks indicate that a complete outcome statement should contain three factors: the observed change, its significance, and the intervening project's contribution. 'Significance" is defined by dictionaries as *'the quality of being worthy of attention or important'* and that is what the method seeks of any outcome. However, this is a value judgment and can be subjective, depending on who is asking, who is responding, and what they value. The parameter for outcome significance should be carefully (or strategically) planned for as a qualifying characteristic. This has not always been the case. The manuals and more than 20 OH case reports shared publicly[1] present widely varying views and approaches to this obtaining or presenting this outcome parameter.

In most of the OH reports, there is no guide on how significance is derived from data. During the mid-term and end-line evaluations of an ActionAid project (Kartini International, 2017; Kartini International, 2018) there is no mention of what the significance parameter is or how its analysis is used. In the case study of Pakistan Country Programme (GDSI, 2015) a detailed paragraph on an outcome's significance is given but the basis not explained prior to the details. When evaluating the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR) 2012 – 2015), the evaluators relate significance to the evaluation questions (Rassman & Smith, 2016). Significance statements were written out and third party

---

[1] These are posted in the <u>outcome harvesting (OH) website</u>. Others were shared during <u>an email OH d-group discussion</u> that took place between May and October 2019.

respondents (during substantiation) were asked the extent to which they agreed with them. In some cases, outcome significance information was ignored or not given emphasis but the analysis that followed appears to address the same interest: why is an outcome important? what does it fit into (for those who categorized)? or what does it tell us? This means significance is adopted variedly to suit implementers' objectives, contexts and agreed evaluation process

There is a challenge in setting parameters for outcome significance. This is revealed in the email d-group discussion (BW[1], May 15, 2019): "*(In discussions with Ricardo), the paradox is that 'outcome harvesting) is a method designed to (and in many ways does) acknowledge ambiguity and complexity, (yet) it is largely based on a deterministic positivist orientation".* BW points out that *"Ricardo had a 'strong focus on designing the harvest around 'intended use for intended users', denying the complexity of how evaluation use evolves. That it was the intended users who decided that (and by implication) what was significant".* During the same discussion KR contributed "Thoughts on OH terminology" (KW, May 14, 2019), presenting that 'Significance addressed the *"So what?"* question. The significance was to be based on *"The relevance of the change, the extent of progress, how it was new/first of its kind, importance to stakeholders, systemic impact, and sustainability."* During the OH Webinar 3 (April 2020), a question on rating significance was posed, and the response was *"You have to give space for different opinions. On what basis can (significance) be accepted as a standard by all. People working at different levels may have an interest and appreciation of why an outcome is more important than the other".* During the email d-group discussion RK (Oct, 2019) cautioned that in the process of exploring *patterns in harvested outcomes* there is a risk of *"injecting (the evaluator's) bias into the process (because they are describing the outcomes and determining how (they fit) into a particular pattern".*

The standard outcome statement structure, according to Ricardo's guide is: Outcome + Significance + Contribution. However, there are parameter placement variations: Outcome + Contribution = Significance. RS (May 13, 2019) states *"over time, many practitioners have converged on using the term 'outcome statement' to refer to the written formulation of (a) who changed what behaviour, when and where, (b) how the intervention (the project) influenced the change and (c) the significance of the change*." BK (Aug 21, 2019), adds that *"'outcome statement' to refer to the whole thing - outcome description, contribution description and significance".* And GS (May 14, 2019) points out that the definition in the glossary of the book reads: "*Outcome statement: The written formulation of a) who changed what, when, and where and b) how the intervention plausibly influenced them. And that this "may include the outcome's significance, context, contribution of other actor's history, and other information if it is useful".*

Setting significance parameters

Significance is the starting point for making sense of harvested outcomes, what they mean, and the lessons and recommendations that can be drawn from them. A consensus on the source of this information is important to make it less subjective and more instructive. Relevant information can then be obtained during harvester's[2] review of project documentation or provided by respondents answering evaluation questions. It can also be developed from analysing a project's interventions and outcomes. This guide or criteria should be prepared (beforehand, e.g. during the inception dialogues) to guide data collection or analysis. Based on the OH case reports and on-line discussions, I suggest the following significance parameters.

---

[1] I am using initials of names of the individual discussants in the online forum

[2] One who manages an outcome harvest, an external or internal evaluator

1. Evaluation uses

This first criteria suggested is the extent to which those validated inform (or serve) any intended evaluation uses. When used in a standard OECD-guided evaluation[1], validated outcomes should answer two significance questions for sustainability: 1. *"The extent to which positive results will be sustained by particular actor transformation"*, AND/OR 2. *The extent to which the validated outcomes will extend beyond the project's intervention period"*. For impact, the outcome significance will be "*The extent to which the validated outcomes imply a lasting state of transformation or positive benefits"*.

Outcome harvesting is expected to be based on Utilization Focused Evaluation (UFE, Patton, 2013), where use of the findings guide data collection, analysis and recommendations. These intended primary uses are set at the very beginning of the harvest (OH Step 1), and can be used to set significance *("The extent to which the validated outcomes inform (or serve) the intended evaluation uses")*. As an example (Rassman & Smith, 2016) used extracted outcomes to inform the following evaluation uses, *"1. To what extent do the outcomes indicate any progress towards building an effective and sustainable network? 2. To what extent do the outcomes indicate that the knowledge and collaborative approach fostered and shared within the network influenced the behaviour of network members? and 3,. To what extent do the outcomes indicate that GNDR's work has influenced other stakeholders in DRR policy and practice…?"*

2. Project objectives and theory of change

This is a common evaluation interest; how validated outcomes contribute to specific project objectives. It is the use of ALL validated outcomes (intended, un-intended, positive and negative) to show how the project's objectives have (or have not) been achieved. This also serves to prove or test the project's assumptions, Theory of Change or logic model. The outcomes should demonstrate, 1. *"The extent to which the project is achieving what was planned or expected",* OR 2, Answer *"What has been achieved and what has not? What constrains what we were targeting?"* A participant (FC) in OH Webinar 1 (Jan 2020) affirms this posing that the analysis should be based on the extent to which *"achieved outcomes relate to the (project's) Theory of Change (ToC) or the organization's mandate. Do they confirm? Or is their falsification?"*

3. Categorization into emerging themes and progress markers

The significance of outcomes can also be related to agreed typologies. Such a framework is set by those categorizing and may be based on their interests and biases (professional or otherwise). They (the analysers) should therefore, present the rationale for any categorization, and what it means to the project (evaluation) objectives.

Given that outcome harvesting is an offshoot of outcome mapping, categorising of who is changing how and can be used to for qualifying significance. The targeted (boundary partners) transforming can be particular individuals, groups, communities, or institutions. Significance can be the extent to which observed outcomes fall reflect the levels of *'Expect, Like, Love to see …"* changes. They can also be categorized into *"those related to (target) actor knowledge/capacity"*, *"those related to actor engagement and promotion (to others)"*, and *"those related to ownership/investment by actors for sustained transformation"* (Nyangaga & Schaeffer, 2011). One contributor added *"the extent to which the project intervention led to a cascade* (using graphic mapping) *of subsequent positive outcomes"*.

---

[1] OECD criteria are used in evaluations to demonstrate an intervention's relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability

When evaluating the Mozambique Community Land Use Fund (EDG, 2014) the harvested outcomes' significance was related to the extent to which the results were "in line with the projected (boundary partner's) outcome challenge *("boundary partner name; what change? when? and where?; and the 'extent to which in line with the (partners' outcome challenges')"*. The assumption is the evaluator is aware of the planned outcomes, or could demonstrate why and how. This is also where the role of negative outcomes comes in, if they can be harvested and validated.

4. <u>Magnitude, intensity or depth of change</u>
Outcome significance can be related to how extensive the observed or reported transformation reported is/was, and this can be horizontal or vertical. (*"The extent to which the outcomes imply widespread change to* a larger population (more members, more communities, across a larger area (local, regional, country-wide, global)" OR *"The extent to which the outcomes are entrenched in culture and policies"*).

Using significance in magnitude of change will require quantitative data analysis using numbers or proportions of transforming entities. Moreover, there will be times when the evaluation will want such transformation compared between units as a signifying quality – the degree of change in different stakeholders, areas, and times.

5. <u>The project's comparative contribution to the transformation:</u>
If contentious efforts are made to collect to show the project's contribution to the outcomes (compared to other factors), significance can be based on how influential the intervention was (*"The extent to which the project was a greater influence on the validated transformation, compared to other factors"*). This is related to contribution analysis. Or *"the extent to which the project was THE unique cause of outcomes of interest".*

When they evaluated the CCAFS program[1] in (Rassman & Schuetz, 2017), the harvesters went through an extensive process of filtering outcomes to their interest – a demonstrable strong link to the project's activities and outputs. They went from more than 100 outcome leads to 14 harvested SMART outcomes. To classify as a 'development outcome' for consideration in the evaluation, the observed change had to have been influenced by information from CCAFS' climate data/tools.

6. <u>Using a combination of outcome parameters</u>
In Aug 2018, USAID-FCF Family Care Cambodia used a combination of several factors to sort and categorize harvested and validated outcomes. Each outcome was categorized according to five dimensions of significance:
o   The role of the developmental evaluation: *Did the developmental evaluation capture, promote, or enable the utilization of the emergent learning(s) associated with the outcome*
o   The type of change: *Did a particular outcome reflect changes primarily related to the knowledge and capabilities of stakeholders? Their engagement and relationships? Or, did more formal institutional and policy changes occur in the program?*
o   The orientation of change: *Did a particular outcome have positive, negative, or both positive and negative effects on the program in the short-term?*
o   The level of change: *Which level of the system did the outcome affect in the short-term: the program, the sector level, the government, or USAID?*

---

[1] The CGIAR's Climate Change and Food Security Program

o   The size of change: *Was the size of the change associated with each outcome small (e.g., only affected one or two organizations), medium (e.g., affected two to three organizations), or large (e.g., affected more than three organizations) in the short-term?*

Recommendation

A concurrence on how to use their significance is central to successful harvesting (and the evaluation process as a whole), and this should be set before data collection. The necessary information will come either from primary data collection or during analysis and/or sense-making.

A recommendation to outcome harvesters is to change the structure of the outcome harvesting statements or their dataset (with the assumption that we read from left to right) as follows.

- From

Who changed how	*Significance of the change*	*Project contribution*

- To

Who changed how	*Project contribution*	*Significance of the change*		
		(Agreed significance parameters)		

In the OH Chat, RK recommends, *"The most important point is to clarify terminology with the client right at the start of a project and suggest / agree a wording that we all understand and that might be useful to the study (e.g. the users of the evaluation). If significance is to be substantiated (fully agree, partially agree, not agree, etc.), the choice of respondents may also depend on who is best placed to substantiate any outcome's significance and the criteria they use"*. With the outcome harvesting data contained in a database, any of such fields can be extracted for extended analysis on their own or in combination with other factors.

References

Earl, S., Carden, F., & Smutylo, T. (2001). *Outcome mapping : building learning and reflection into development programs*. International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

EDG. (2014). *Evaluation of the Mozambique Community Land Use Fund*.

GDSI. (2015). *PO 6534: Evaluation of the International Growth Centre Volume 3: Case Study of Pakistan Country Programme.*

Kartini International. (2017). *Midterm Evaluation of ActionAid She Can Project.*

Kartini International. (2018). *Endline Evaluation of ActionAid She Can Report*.

Nyangaga, J., & Schaeffer, H. (2011). *A complimentary approach to progres markers*. Retrieved from https://www.outcomemapping.ca/download/juliusnyangaga_en_Progress_Markers_Research_04-Jul-2011.pdf.

Rassman, K., & Schuetz, T. (2017). *CCAFS outcomes evaluation report – Volume 1: An assessment of the influence of CCAFS' climate data and tools on outcomes achieved 2010-2016*.

Rassman, K., & Smith, R. (2016). *Evaluation Report. Outcomes evaluation of the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR) 2012 – 2015.*

Wilson-Grau, R. (2019). *Outcome Harvesting: Principles, Steps, and Evaluation Applications*. Information Age Publishing Inc.

Wilson-Grau, R., & Britt, H. (2012). *Outcome Harvesting*. Ford Foundation. Retrieved from https://usaidlearninglab.org/sites/default/files/resource/files/Outome Harvesting Brief FINAL 2012-05-2-1.pdf.