LAB 2012

Outcome Mapping Lab 2012: Adaptation and Innovation in Outcome Mapping

When can we throw away the book?

Outcome Mapping (OM) is most useful in planning, monitoring and evaluating development initiatives when we apply its principles and adapt the concepts and tools in the book to fit our particular context. This was one of the findings emerging from a recent gathering of OM practitioners in Beirut in February 2012.

The OM Lab 2012 brought together 46 monitoring and evaluation practitioners from 24 countries to discuss the adaptations, innovations and advances in Outcome Mapping since it first emerged more than 10 years ago. Held in Beirut, Lebanon, OM Lab 2012 sought to create an environment of knowledge exchange, learning, networking, creativity and confidence, for participants to reflect on a variety of case studies and experiences and come away with new ideas to consider in their work.

The agenda was crafted to offer a dynamic mix of keynote presentations, case studies, open space

, discussions, and debates and conversations around OM dilemmas, successes and mistakes. Over the three days there was much to reflect on and in this brief the organizers offer a succinct distillation of the highlights. Two key streams emerged in the discussions: the fundamental principles of OM and the practice of OM.

All resources and materials from the Lab (the agenda, presentations, case studies and participant list) can be found at: www.outcomemapping.ca

"This was a very useful and inspiring meeting with other practitioners; case studies and discussion that gave food for thought and especially ideas and techniques to bring back to our work. And a community to fall back on for more questions and feedback." - OM Lab 2012 participant

The fundamentals of Outcome Mapping

Throughout the Lab, participants raised and discussed questions such as: What is OM? What are the core principles or values of OM? How do you know, after adapting it, if you are still doing OM? When is it inappropriate to use OM?

Possible answers percolated through several sessions; the thinking was diverse and no consensus was reached – either on how to frame the question or on how to answer it. The dominant thinking hovered around three main ideas, presented below, with editorial license, as strong consensus statements.

In her **keynote presentation, Patricia Rogers** posed two key questions to set the tone of the Lab: *When should we choose OM?* And *How do we use OM well?* She cautioned about forcing methods on to situations instead of really examining the situation and then choosing the most appropriate method. And in that vein wondered *is OM more or less suitable in combination with other particular methods or research designs?* The ensuing table discussions repeatedly brought about the question *when we are adapting OM, how do we know if we have lost the essence?*

Seek usefulness over methodological fidelity

What is important is not whether or not you are really doing Outcome Mapping – or any other method - but whether you are keeping your organization in touch with the reality in which it is working and the results it is seeing. So the message is to adapt, select and hybridize to get what is useful and important; and seek relevance through flexibility not methodological fidelity. Also, recognize what is driving or determining your M&E: Who is demanding information and for what purposes.

Given that donor accountability is a very real and valid M&E focus, many organizations and programmes are electing to use OM alongside logical frameworks. Several of the cases presented at the Lab discussed this, including the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, the VECO's value chain development programme and the Mwananchi governance and transparency programme.

The 5 key OM assumptions

Outcome Mapping is based on 5 key assumptions about development and humanitarian interventions. Seeing the world this way is essential to OM but not exclusive to it. Other approaches could well incorporate the same assumptions.

1. Sustainable ecosystems and human wellbeing depend on human behaviour. The success of introduced changes, be they infrastructural, organizational, policy, regulatory or technological, will depend of the behaviours of the people they touch. People in their social and individual roles will need to: inspect and maintain roads and bridges; monitor and respond to water quality; respect and comply with laws; wash their own and their children's hands; adopt healthy and ecologically safe agronomic practices; or demand their rights - depending what the intervention is focused on. Development always involves establishing patterns of behaviour.

2. There are limits to the influence that any intervention can expect to exert. Depending on its scope, resources, credibility, context, etc., an intervention can expect to directly influence certain individuals and organizations. Those actors it can bring within its sphere of influence may also be influenced by other actors and forces that may be within or beyond the intervention's direct influence. In the Mwananchi governance and transparency programme, OM was used as a way of working more systematically and intentionally with civil society and media organisations through a process of systematic identification of the main actors involved in a change process, which ones the project teams had opportunities to directly influence, and then the kinds of behavioural changes involved.

3. People contribute to their own wellbeing; there are no passive beneficiaries. People's well being includes agency - the knowledge and power to play a role in creating, maintaining, assessing or adjusting the actions that affect them and ecosystems on which life depends. People who have no influence over the programmes reaching them are not being helped.

4. Differing, yet equally valid perspectives will always coexist. Actors will interpret things depending on their particular stake in a situation. The ways in which these stakeholders are motivated and act may differ and may not be consistent or supportive of each other. Engaging the relevant actors while recognizing, reconciling or managing their differing impetuses for involvement is a normal part of an intervention.

5. Ecological, social and economic resilience depend on interrelationships. Sustainable improvements in wellbeing involve influencing interconnected contributions from a variety of political, social and economic actors. The engagement of these actors in appropriate, interconnected patterns of behavior is essential in building the capacity of stakeholders to maintain or adjust their contributions as conditions change, as needs emerge and as the actors themselves evolve.

Kevin Kelly, Steff Deprez and Dalia Bayoumi in small group discussion.

In Papua New Guinea, sustainable forest NGOs that have traditionally operated separately came together to align their efforts – specifically through progress markers – in order to effectively contribute together to their shared vision of sustainable natural resource management. This process also provided an opportunity for the groups to assert agency and ownership of the direction of the partnerships.

Contexts in which OM is especially relevant

OM can add value when used in planning, monitoring or evaluating an intervention which:

- Includes changed behaviours or relationships among the intended results;
- Anticipates that desirable and intended results may evolve or emerge as the intervention progresses;
- Seeks 'sustainable' results with the resilience to adapt with changing situations;
- Intends to monitor progress, making adjustments during implementation; or
- Intends to focus on results defined from the perspective of local actors or beneficiaries.

The practice of Outcome Mapping: Reworking and revising practice

Before the Lab, participants were surveyed about the topics they would most like to discuss during the event. Their preferences reflect the struggles that many OM users encounter: data collection, data management, dealing with organizational resistance, using M&E findings, managing time & resource requirements, using OM in non-OM contexts.

In different moments, participants discussed the dilemmas they faced using OM, the actions and / or adaptations that helped and the strategies to consider for using OM. Six common themes emerged.

Outcome Harvesting, as presented by **Ricardo Wilson-Grau** in a feature presentation, draws from OM with focus on the identifying the primary intended users and principal intended uses to then design useful evaluation questions, which include *what?* and *so what?*. Outcomes are investigated, as well as the contribution and the significance of the outcome. Important to note is that the harvest is not based on what has been done or 'achieved'. Instead informants affirm or confirm what has been investigated and documented.

1. **Be guided by use of M&E at all stages.** Clarify intended uses at, or before, the design stage, clearly differentiating learning and accountability. Let utility (plus feasibility, probity, and quality) guide M&E activities and decisions at all stages of the intervention.

2. **Use the data**. Begin feeding findings into the appropriate organizational processes and events at the earliest possible moment. Look for opportunities to maintain the utility of this information by supporting reflective and adaptive management. For example, the Accountability in Tanzania programme systematically reports and aggregates the different levels of Progress Markers to move from individual anecdotes of change in behaviour to a more comprehensive body of evidence derived from different CSOs working in different sectors in different parts of the country; this lets the project assess the extent to which a boundary partner is collectively exemplifying a changed behaviour.

3. **When innovating, start small.** Learn how to add value as you build demand for and competence in interpreting and using M&E findings. Document your experiences and share the stories.

4. **Simplify M&E tools and processes** to the greatest degree possible. In collecting and managing data, be selective, be strategic, and do the absolute minimum required to add value. *"The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation has been using a variety of adapted forms and documentation processes…the 'journaling' of evaluative information has been streamlined and provides a constant 'touchstone' for staff…the forms provide staff with a way to identify, formalize and express both the tactic and explicit knowledge held by the team about their work."* (Kevin Kelpin).

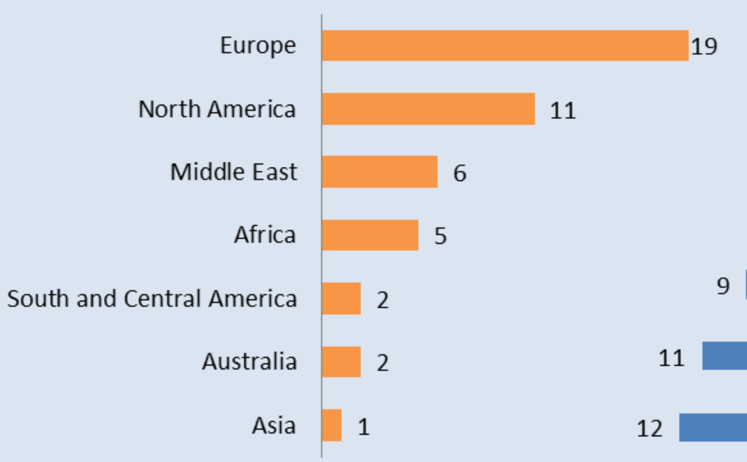
5. **Adapt M&E tools to the context**. Innovate by bringing in new ideas to improve utility and relevance of existing or accepted frameworks. Select, combine or hybridize methods to get what fits and what can help your organization tell its stories and strengthen its interventions.

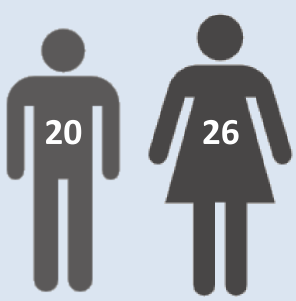
6. Use M&E as a social learning opportunity. The process of doing monitoring and evaluation is an opportunity to enable collective learning, build relationships, and empower those we are doing the evaluation with, especially in terms of being validated, having their voices heard, creating a sense of partnership and agency and building capacity. For example, the Belgian NGO Vredeseilanden (commonly known as VECO) organizes bi-annual meetings where farmers, VECO staff and other boundary partners gather to share information, update each other on the progress and results of the piece of the value chain they are working on, discuss the roles and contributions of partners, and to agree on future joint activities. This multi-stakeholder reflection and analysis between changes at the level of the boundary partners (i.e. their progress markers) and the support strategies of VECO's programme team demonstrate that planned spaces and rhythms are central to sharing, debate, learning and decision-making.

Patricia Rogers led a presentation and discussion around **Better Evaluation** – to carve out space to dig deeper on the evaluation side of OM and to consider issues of quality (what is quality evaluation and how do we get it in an OM context), synthesis (how do we synthesize evidence into overall evaluative judgment about progress), and evaluative rubrics (to help make sense of data and provide performance rating). www.betterevaluation.org takes this discussion further.

A diverse range of participants

The range of experiences brought to the Lab by the participants was rich, with many different backgrounds, some with a huge amount of OM experience and some with little or no exposure to OM. This dictated the flow and outcomes of the Lab, and made for lively discussions and helpful clarifications.





Graphs from the top: representation from seven regions; participants included thinkers, doers and donors; gender balance.

This report is the first in a series of publications from the OM Lab 2012. Look out on outcomemapping.ca for highlight briefs which dig deeper into some of the hot topics that emerged from the Lab, a series of case studies, and sound bites on successes and challenges of using and adapting OM.