

Outcome Harvesting: a methodology to track change that is hard to measure

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W W W . M E S O P A R T N E R . C O M

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We need more than numbers

Development practitioners are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that their work is relevant and that it contributes to sustainably addressing key challenges. There are many different ways to capture and report achievements. The focus is most often on reporting achieved results in the form of hard numbers, for example the number of jobs created, the amount of income generated or the number of businesses that show increased growth, investment and competitiveness – often combined with the need to show value for money, i.e. that the project got the most out of the money they received from the funders. A case in point: the three common impact indicators that the Donor Committee for Enterprise Development (DCED) Standard for Results Measurement² recommends to be used in all private sector development initiatives are scale (the number of beneficiaries reached), income (the net additional income generated), and jobs (the net additional jobs created) – all numbers.

What gets lost in these numbers is their context – the nuances of how the changes were achieved, what challenges the projects faced and how they managed to overcome them. Without this context, it is almost impossible to say whether the number is good or bad. The numbers also do not say anything about how the constraints around the actors shifted to sustain the changes achieved or, indeed, how the actors have become better able to initiate change themselves in the future through improved collaboration and coordination.

Numbers are not only central to reporting the achievements of development projects

and programmes, but beyond that they are used to manage the performance of the implementing partners by predefining targets that need to be achieved. This is increasingly combined with payment-for-results type contracts where implementers only get paid when the results are achieved – this is generally called Outcome-Based Performance Management (OBPM). Evidence suggests, however, that managing complex development initiatives by using OBPM is problematic in principle³. Instead of predefined targets, the performance of such complex initiatives can only be improved by exploring what is possible, what works and how, and by constantly learning and improving. This also requires an understanding of the change that goes beyond capturing numbers.

Understanding this is particularly relevant during times of fragility and crisis, for example during the Covid-19 pandemic or when working in fragile and conflict-affected environments. Since the situation and also the information base to make a decision are changing almost every day in such contexts, it is nearly impossible to predefine results of a change initiative, even over the course of a few weeks, as we simply do not know in advance what a good outcome will look like. While this sounds obvious for times of crisis, it is equally true for complex change initiatives during times of “relative stability”, as this stability is often less stable than we perceive it to be. In more stable contexts, we might be able to plan a few months or even a year in advance in certain cases, but we still need to remain vigilant and adapt to a changing context and new insights.

² More information on the [DCED Standard](#)

³ For a [description](#) of why this is problematic

And even in times of stability, we do not know how the people we try to influence will react to our activities; whenever we work in a social system, we need to constantly learn and adapt.

Therefore to complement the numbers and capture rich and context-specific

aspects of change that are necessary to effectively learn and improve, a variety of different methods need to be used in addition to measuring numbers. In 2019, Helvetas and Mesopartner started exploring together a method that captures such nuances of change called Outcome Harvesting.

Outcome Harvesting in the Western Balkans

Between September 2019 and March 2020, Helvetas reached out to the economic development consultancy Mesopartner to design and implement an Outcome Harvesting process in three countries in the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Helvetas, together with its national partners, has implemented projects of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) in the Western Balkan region for over a decade. This Outcome Harvesting process responded to the objective of Helvetas to better understand the effects and effectiveness of three of its most mature Market Systems Development (MSD) projects while at the same time explored a better way to capture rich but hard-to-measure and unanticipated changes in the complex and dynamic contexts of the Western Balkans. The three projects selected in this Outcome Harvesting process are Enhancing Youth Employment (EYE) in Kosovo, MarketMakers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and RisiAlbania in Albania.

Outcome Harvesting⁴ is a method that enables evaluators or projects to identify, formulate, verify and make sense of qualitative outcomes of their initiatives. The approach was developed by Ricardo

Wilson-Grau and colleagues and has been used since the early 2000s to monitor and evaluate the achievements of hundreds of networks, non-governmental organisations, research centres, think tanks and community-based organisations around the world.

In Outcome Harvesting, outcomes are defined as *a change in the behaviours, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organisation, or institution that are within the sphere of a project's influence*. These outcomes need to be observable and significant. Outcome Harvesting follows a process of six defined steps that aim to collect (harvest) as many outcomes as possible and assess and verify the contribution of the project to these outcomes. Using Outcome Harvesting, the evaluator or harvester gleans information from reports, harvest workshops, personal interviews and other sources to describe the outcomes and document how the project has contributed to them. These outcomes can be positive or negative, intended or unintended, but there needs to be a connection between the project and the outcomes, and this connection should be verifiable.

⁴ A description of the method and further resources can be found [here](#)

Outcome Harvesting does not measure progress towards predetermined targets or objectives, it collects evidence of what has been achieved in reality rather than what was planned. It then works backwards to determine whether and how the project or intervention contributed to the change. The types of outcomes and the patterns that are revealed not only contribute to providing evidence that the project under investigation was effective, but also contribute to important insights for the project to learn and adapt to looking forward. In that sense, Outcome Harvesting is not only useful for assessing the effectiveness of projects, but is equally

useful for teams to come together and work through the results, make sense of them and decide on what to do next and how to adapt.

Neither Helvetas nor Mesopartner had much experience with the method before, but were interested in exploring how it could be used to complement existing monitoring and measurement approaches. To design the process, Mesopartner therefore partnered with the organisation Voices that Count, which contributed with its expertise in the method. Voices that Count specialises in narrative-based methods.

A study focusing on learning and improving

The objectives of the process were to help the project teams **learn and improve** on what they were doing; **document evidence** that showed that the projects' interventions had achieved observable results; and contribute to **learning in the practice of market systems development** by disseminating the results and experiences of the study. An additional objective was added later, namely to **test the efficacy of outcome harvesting** in complementing the projects' internal monitoring and results measurement (MRM) system to capture rich but hard-to-measure and unanticipated changes in complex and dynamic contexts. The study focused on changes in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector – this included Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) activities in the cases of Albania and Kosovo. This sector was selected as all three projects have activities that focus on that particular sector, and this would therefore allow cross-comparison and peer learning.

The process followed the adjusted six steps of Outcome Harvesting used by Voices that Count (Figure 1). The majority of outcomes were harvested during a two-day workshop with each project team independently in October 2019. Already during this first workshop, the teams were asked to string the initially collected outcomes together into an overarching narrative that would tell the story of change in the sector that was initiated or supported by the project. The narratives aimed to share the story of the projects and their effects in an easily accessible and convincing way. Outcome descriptions were further verified and revised by the teams after the first workshop. A second two-day workshop was organised in November 2019 to specifically focus on enhancing the Outcome tagging.

In order to substantiate and verify the outcomes, the consultants ran a number of key informant interviews. Furthermore, a selected group of people who are knowledgeable in the sector in each country were invited to provide feedback

on the credibility of the entire narratives for each project.

The outcomes and patterns were analysed and interpreted mostly during a 2.5-day sensemaking workshop in January 2020 where the three project teams came together for the first time in this process.

During that workshop, the teams engaged with the data, interpreted what it meant for them, and discussed possible consequences for their projects. The workshop also encouraged peer-to-peer learning between the projects involved, for example, on topics such as gender and social inclusion or systemic change

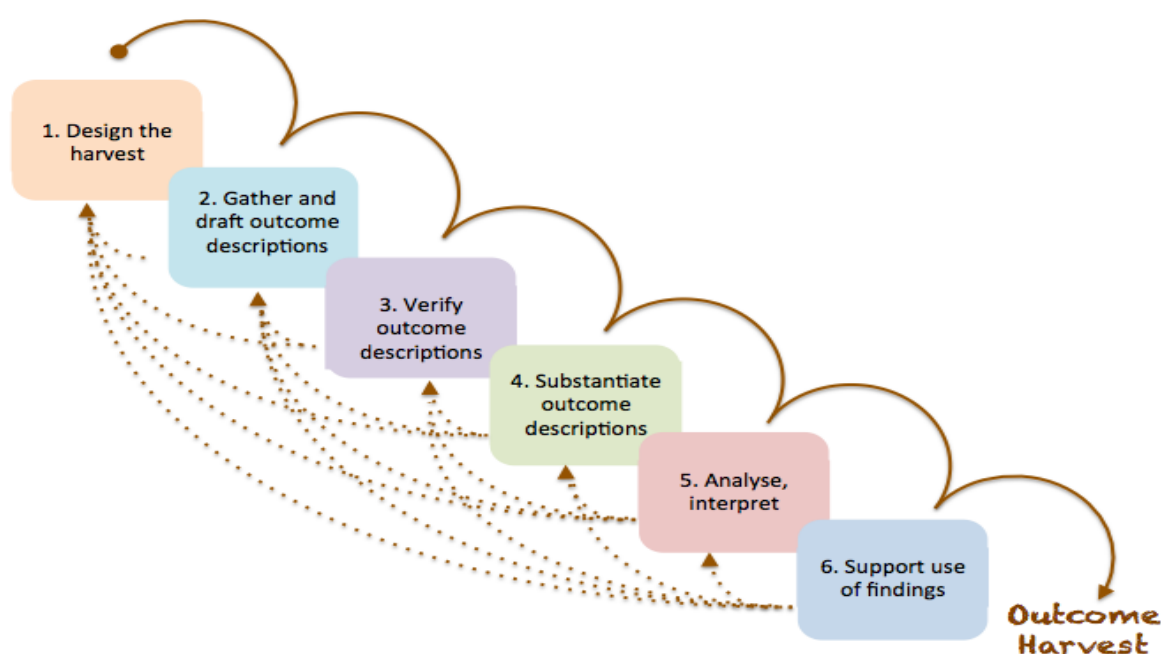


Figure 1: Six steps of the Outcome Harvesting process (adapted from Wilson-Grau)

Significant contributions by the projects

The outcome harvest across the three countries resulted in 71 outcomes. The majority of the observed changes to which the projects contributed were at the level of *practices, behaviour or actions* with fewer changes in *collaboration and coordination among actors* and *policies, laws & regulations* (Figure 2).

Overall, across the three countries involved in the Outcome Harvest, the type of project intervention that was mentioned most often was *facilitating dialogue, coordination and collaboration among actors*. Also *capacity building*,

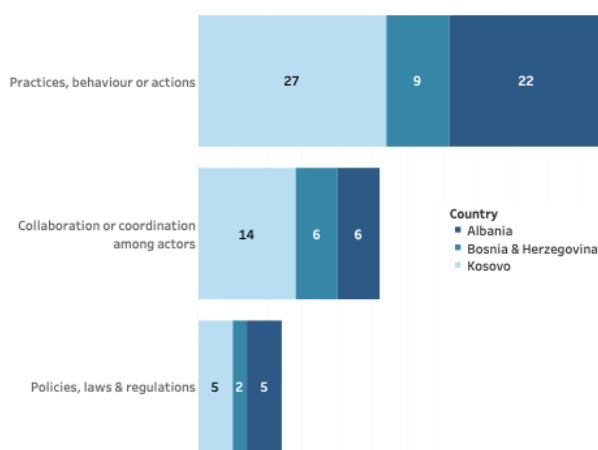


Figure 2: Total number of outcomes per type of change per country

bringing in external expertise, and co-developing business models with actors seem to be successful intervention strategies.

In addition, the teams also scored the projects' contribution on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 was very little contribution by the project and 5 was that the change would not have happened without the project's support. The distribution of the outcomes according to this rating is shown in Figure 3.

As indicated in the graph, most outcomes were not all fully dependent on project interventions and might have or would likely have happened without the project – whether in a different shape or likely much later. However, 16 outcomes (23%) would

not have happened without the existence of the project according to the project teams (rating of 5) as the change comprised some new practices introduced by the project. and in 14 outcomes (rating of 4) the projects brought in the key idea and ingredients to improve some existing services.

The collected outcomes showed that the three projects have made some significant contributions to the ICT sectors in the three countries. That these outcomes have actually taken place can be supported with credible evidence collected by the project. Types of changes documented in the assessment (this is not an exhaustive list and not all changes were seen in all countries) included:

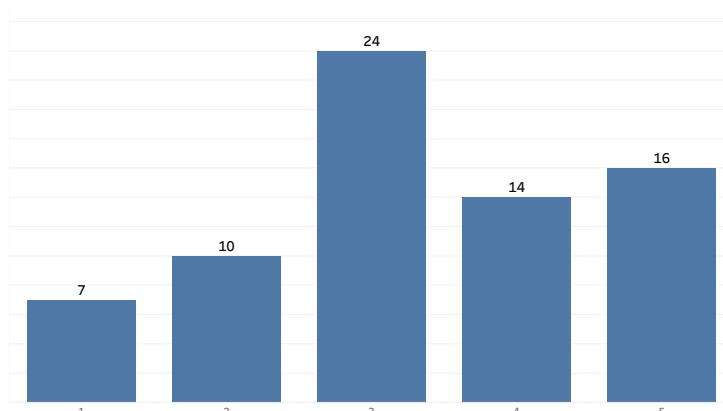


Figure 3: Total number of outcomes for each of the contribution ratings across all projects

- The way in which companies in the ICT sector collaborate and how the sector is coordinated and represented to the government by an industry body
- Interest in the sector by government, specific agencies and political actors more broadly
- How the sector is regulated
- How investment in the ICT sector is promoted
- How companies attempt to diversify their markets and services
- How skills development is delivered through both formal and non-formal training delivered by both private and public training providers
- How young people are guided towards a career in ICT
- How gender roles are regarded in the sector

The sensemaking workshop was an important part of the assessment as was its contribution to the projects' learning, which is described in the next section.

Outcome Harvesting and adaptive management

An important aspect of the sensemaking workshop was not only to look back at what changes have occurred but also to look forward and learn from the patterns that can be seen in the outcomes. This is how Outcome Harvesting can directly feed into decision-making about the way forward and support adaptive management. The teams were asked a number of questions to orient their view forward:

- What outcomes should have occurred as a result of the interventions of the projects but have not?
- Looking at what has and has not happened, what is the next logical change – what do you think will be the outcomes that you will harvest next year?
- Which of these changes do you think are crucial to investing in? What should you do differently?

Based on these questions, the projects came up with a number of adaptations to their plans moving forward. For EYE Kosovo, these included, for example, reinforcing its support to non-formal training providers (e.g. supporting accreditation of training providers) and supporting job-matching providers to add additional services (e.g. based on artificial intelligence). For MarketMakers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, changes included the acquisition of new partners to scale up interventions that are known to work and changes in the resourcing of the project to better respond to the patterns. RisiAlbania will be looking at adding new partners, creating new linkages based on trends that can be seen and opportunities that are emerging, as well as supporting new services (career guidance, placements, the supply of cybersecurity services, responding to new regulations such as GDPR, etc.) and other changes.

Limitations of the method

One of the limitations of the way we used the methodology for this assessment is that we used the project teams themselves as the main source of outcomes. This inevitably introduces a bias into the data. While we trust the sincerity and self-critical attitude of the project teams in the way they assessed their effects on the sector, this bias cannot be completely eliminated. In order to mitigate some of the bias, the preliminary outcomes were shared with other external reviewers of the projects

and Helvetas. These are key people in the respective countries who know the sectors and can judge the significance of the contribution by the projects. The feedback of these reviewers was predominantly positive, confirming the credibility and plausibility of the outcomes.

There are ways to overcome the self-assessment bias even more rigorously, which is why Outcome Harvesting is used in formal evaluations. In our case,

however, a strong focus was on enabling the project teams to learn, both from and about the methodology. Hence coming together as a team and working through the results, making sense of them and making decisions about how to adapt was the most important output of the exercise.

It was the role of the project teams themselves, not the consultants who designed the study, to make sense of the results and decide how to integrate them into their project looking ahead.

The way forward

This has been a very rich experience for both Mesopartner and Helvetas and we are looking forward to using the methodology again in the future. The projects involved showed an interest in integrating the method into their monitoring frameworks. And on an organisational level at Helvetas, the methodology is now discussed by different working groups. After the positive experience with Helvetas, Mesopartner used the Outcome Harvesting process for an end-of-project team reflection in Sudan in May 2020. Compared to the process in the Balkans, this one was shorter and only consisted of internal team reflections. The fragility of Sudan over the past years

proved to be a particular challenge for a traditionally planned project to reach its objectives. They therefore wanted to find a methodology that would allow them to see everything that the project had achieved beyond what was planned. After these positive experiences, Mesopartner will explore further opportunities to apply the method again with interested clients who want to know more about their projects than just whether they have achieved their quantitative targets.

If you would like to have a similar intervention, please contact [Marcus Jenal](#).