

# IT'S ALL ABOUT CHANGE

## Is outcome harvesting all that new? Confessions from a consultant...

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What changes do we make? How? Why? It is still vital to answer these questions, even as the need to address poverty and human disaster surpasses available funding and as project ideas and interventions must inevitably be prioritized.

Five years ago, 'Theory of Change' (ToC) was the approach to answer the 'how and why' questions to change.

Today we see outcome harvesting (OH) as the way to understand and report on the changes we make. But is outcome harvesting all that new? Haven't evaluators always tried to understand how interventions contribute to the changes in people's lives? Would social workers, doctors, nurses, teachers, psychosocial support teams and community workers keep working if they saw absolutely no positive changes – or results – because of their work? Would advocates continue to knock at decision-makers' doors, decade after decade, if they had found absolutely no evidence, or only the slightest sign, that they could make a difference? I dare to answer with a 'No'. So, what does 'Outcome Harvesting' add to the world of results-based monitoring?

### Sixty years of development aid – what is our contribution?

Donors, planners and practitioners have been fascinated and motivated by the idea that we could 'promote development for as long as there has been 'development cooperation'. Interventions and planned programs to 'promote peace and reconciliation', 'strengthen domestic markets', 'combat youth unemployment' or 'ensure democracy and women's rights' are numerous. Our expectations have been high, and the implicit promises we have made to ourselves and to our donors about the changes we could

make are many, but also very difficult – if not impossible – to document.

Let me confess: In my twenty years as an advocacy officer, program manager and evaluation consultant, I have never come across a single intervention of which I could say, *for certain*, that it had contributed significantly to 'development'. That's development defined as structural changes at the level of 'peace and reconciliation', 'democracy or human rights'. I have never seen one report that provided solid *proof* that any development intervention could claim a *significant* contribution – let alone the credit – for structural change.

I have – on the other hand – had the pleasure and honor of evaluating countless interventions, where the persistence and patience of field staff and health and human rights professionals have definitely contributed to strengthening the *social, cultural, intellectual and political capital* of people, organizations or groups. Where support has enabled beneficiaries to take their destiny into their own hands and (contribute to) change it for the better. This almost *always* happens at the personal, household or family level. It happens *frequently* at the level of their own organization (NGO, enterprise or ministry), community or municipality. And *sometimes* – but more rarely and often only when the right, unplannable combination of actors and political factors are in place – it happens at national, regional or even international level.

Assuming that many colleagues in the sector share the same experience, OH may offer two important things: The first is an alternative narrative about what 'development investments' are all about and what we can claim we contribute to *for sure*. Secondly, it offers an approach to documenting, and reflecting about, change which embraces the fact that change can be unpredictable and hard to plan.

### Outcome harvesting: An alternative narrative about development

First, and perhaps most importantly, OH offers an alternative narrative about how development investments contribute to change. OH takes the point of departure that “change is essentially about people relating to each other and their environment”. It focuses on changes in the behavior, relationships, actions and activities in the people, groups, and organizations that we and our partners work with directly (i.e., outcomes). It suggests that there must be changes in peoples’ behavior and relations, and in organizations’ policies and the practices that the intervention works with directly, in order to reach larger goals and to contribute to systemic change, such as ‘peace’ or ‘human rights’.

OH insists on talking about change as ‘tangible’ actions or expressions, which are linked to everyday life and human interaction. It moves us beyond the usual ‘development lingo’ and buzzwords of ‘governance’, ‘resilience’, ‘sustainability’ or ‘gender sensitivity’. These expressions may sound great when you write them, but they are difficult to grasp and measure, when the tires hit the tar, let alone to document and share our results with constituencies or institutional donors. OH reminds us that the ‘outcomes’ (or results) we can ‘harvest’ through our ‘development investment’ relate to direct changes in people’s or organizations’ social, cultural, intellectual and political capital. As ‘development investors’, we cannot ‘buy’ democracy; or peace; or stronger domestic markets. However, we can invest in people’s social, political and intellectual ‘capital’. In this way they are better positioned themselves to create or explore windows of opportunity to challenge the structural causes of discrimination, violence and poverty. Outcome harvesting helps us to assess the ‘direct benefits’ of that investment.

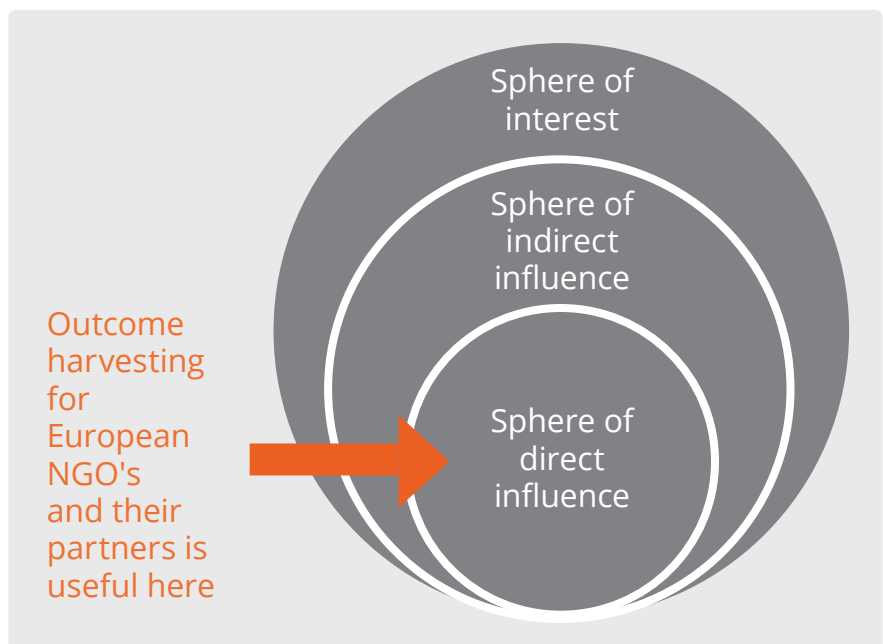
Sometimes we are lucky enough to witness such processes ourselves, during the (short) time-span of a project. At other times they unfold several years after we have left the intervention and have forgotten all about it. However, what is common to all cases

is that structural changes remain outside the sphere of our direct influence. Documenting our contribution to them is often a long, cumbersome and costly investment – and not a job that can be done through outcome harvesting.

In other words, OH is not the approach to choose if one wishes to explore the longer-term impact of an investment that reaches beyond the intervention’s direct sphere of influence.

### Outcome Harvesting: Beyond the ‘log-frame’ of reporting

OH offers a fairly simple approach to identifying and reflecting on the change we contribute to, and it embraces the fact that ‘not all changes can be planned or



foreseen in advance’. OH is based on the assumption that we operate in a world of complexity. Change is rarely linear and it is rarely possible to define exactly what an intervention will achieve – although a log-frame may want us to believe so.

In my experience a ‘log-frame’ tends to ‘lock’ our minds onto certain planned results that we believe we need to look for during monitoring and evaluation exercises and whose achievements determine the intervention’s ‘success’ or failure’. Conversely, OH invites us to look at change with ‘open minds’, and to move beyond predetermined outcomes. It encourages us and our partners to collect evidence

of what has been achieved – intended or not – and work backwards from there, to determine whether and how the project or intervention has contributed to the change (or maintenance of status quo).

As such, OH contributes to answering the question ‘did we achieve the planned results (outcomes) or not?’ Moreover, it moves beyond the sphere of ‘donor accountability’ towards contracts and pre-determined goals. It asks the kinds of question that may contribute to organizational learning and strategic revisions, such as:

- What unforeseen and planned changes do we see?
- How did our intervention contribute?
- Which other factors contributed?
- What can we, as ‘development investors’, learn from that?

### **Outcome Harvesting: a ‘Theory of Change’ in Disguise?**

Do these questions sound familiar? If so, it is because planners who have used a theory of change approach to planning have already asked themselves exactly the same questions (although not in past but in the present tense). They did this when they planned an intervention and reflected on how and why they thought that intervention was likely to contribute to intended changes.

Like OH, ToC is based on the assumptions that we operate in a world of complexity, and that change is rarely linear.

Like OH, ToC, at the project and program level<sup>1</sup>, focuses on ‘change’ in the behavior, relationships, actions and activities of the people, groups, and organizations that we work with directly (i.e., outcomes). ToC suggests that there must be changes in peoples’ behavior and relationships and in organizations’ policies and the practices that the intervention

works with directly, in order to reach larger goals and to contribute to systemic change.

Like OH, ToC insists on talking about change as ‘tangible’ actions or expressions that are linked to everyday life and human interaction. Last, but not least, both approaches emphasize the importance of participation. Both approaches contribute to strengthening our mutual understanding of how and why we contribute to change at project and program level, when they are used in participatory processes of joint reflection and learning that involving planners and implementers alike. This re-enforces team-building and gains stronger commitment to joint interventions.

### **ToC and OH – a lemniscate of learning?**

However, whereas TOC is an approach to planning, OH is an approach to monitoring and evaluation. TOC offers a way to reflect critically on the – often implicit – beliefs that guide our planning and implementation. ToC prompts us to ask the question: Does change towards a predetermined objective really take place the way we think, or do other actors and actions contribute too? These two actions enable us to adjust our plans – and the beliefs that go with it – before or during the lifespan of an intervention.

OH, on the other hand, provides useful insights about the results that have been achieved and how the intervention has contributed, after or during the life of a project.

Combining OH and ToC offers interesting opportunities for learning. In the planning phase of an intervention, we can use OH to compare the way we think – or thought – change would happen (our ToC), with our harvested knowledge about how the change actually unfolds in our sphere of direct intervention.

As illustrated on the following page, when OH and ToC are used at project level, and in our sphere of direct influence, they are like the two different sides of a lemniscate – the symbol of infinity - which so nicely represents the ongoing nature of learning and the continuous and intertwined path we take when we learn.

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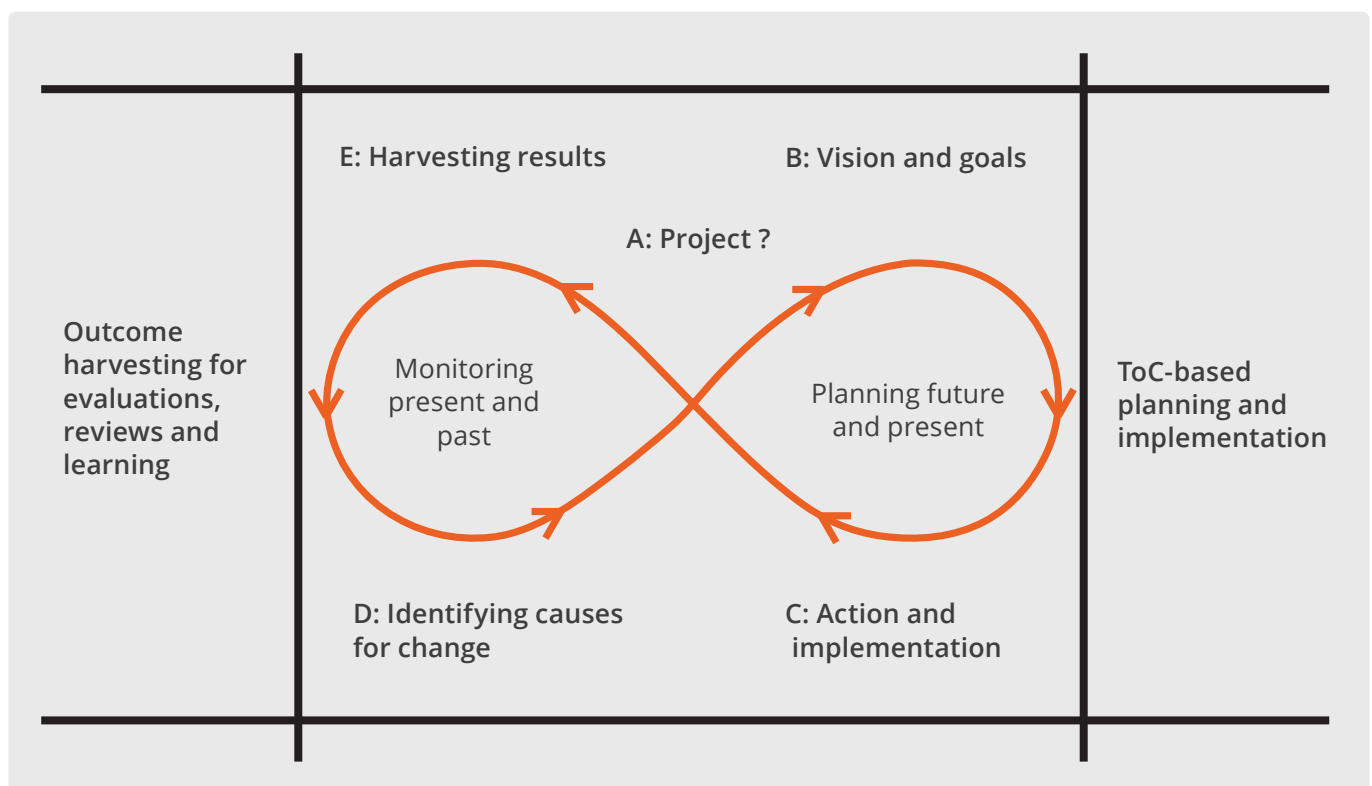
<sup>1</sup> Theory of Change is generally used at three levels:

- 1) at the organizational level, as a lead document and as a process which guides everything from strategy to allocation of resources and to communication;
- 2) at the program thematic or geographical level, to provide in-depth analyses and summaries of specific approaches to influencing change in policy and planning and
- 3) at the project level, to help practitioners clarify and articulate how their project or program can contribute to social and relational change, in a particular context, sector or thematic area.

The left side of the lemniscate represents the realm of monitoring the present and the past. Here, outcomes (results) are harvested based on observations, and the causes of change are analyzed and lessons are learnt.

Knowledge generated in this realm feeds into the right side of the lemniscate, the realm of planning for the future. Here ideas, best practices and new proposals are produced, based on our beliefs – our theories – of how things change (TOC). However, the elaboration of ideas and approaches may stop, and this could result in unrealistic project plans, without the inputs that are received from the realm of monitoring and outcome harvesting.

**Figure 1: The OH/ToC lemniscate**



Taken in isolation, each side of the figure presents a certain value, in terms of understanding how change happens. However the figure's full value is harvested, when the two sides are connected.

However, whereas an isolated OH process offers tangible, evidence – or at least real-life-based answers to questions, such as which change takes place, how and why – it offers planners and implementers little help to answer the 'what changes how and why' questions. They need these answers to be able to raise funds for new projects, convince their management that an intervention is worth the effort or to create a common understanding in a team about how we will work together to achieve the change we would like to see.

Whereas a ToC approach to strategic planning may contribute to better and more realistic projects, based on explicitly articulated beliefs about how and why we think change happens, the approach remains an academic exercise, generally because our plans are not compared to reality and the evidence of change that we may collect.

Thus the 'harvest' or added value of both approaches increases, when ToC and Outcome Harvesting are combined into a lemniscate of infinite learning; one where the lessons-learnt from the past feed into the planning of the future.

At project level, OH and ToC share the same definition of change. Both approaches recognize the complexities of change and both use common, tangible language to talk about change. Thus, the barriers for their combination are more likely to be practical and organizational rather than methodological or conceptual.

**Figure 2: ToC and OH - Differences and Similarities**

	<b>Theory of Change for Project Planning</b>	<b>Outcome Harvesting</b>
<b>Focus</b>	Forward looking: Focuses on how and why we think change will happen – and the way our intervention will contribute to this.	Looks at the past. Focuses on what change has happened – and whether, and how, our intervention and other factors contributed to it.
<b>When is the approach useful?</b>	Before and during implementation.	During and after implementation.
<b>Language:</b>	Theory of change focuses on ‘preconditions’ as a common denominator of inputs, outputs, objectives, and indicators writ large – changes in social actors’ knowledge, skills, relations, behavior, functioning.	Outcome Harvesting defines “outcome” as a change in the behavior writ large — actions, activities, relationships, policies or practices — of one or more societal actors.
<b>Questions answered:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ What change do we want to achieve?</li> <li>▶ Which ‘pathways’ or ‘preconditions’ or outcomes will bring us to the desired change; and in which ‘order’ (pathway)?</li> <li>▶ How will our interventions contribute?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Which changes took place?</li> <li>▶ How significant were they? (Compared to the baseline and the desired long-term change.)</li> <li>▶ How did our intervention contribute? (What was the pathway)?</li> <li>▶ What were the contributions of other factors?</li> </ul>
<b>Challenge addressed</b>	A world of complexity. Change is rarely a linear process where ‘A’ leads to ‘B’ but rather a result of multiple factors and actors. Planned change processes may therefore be difficult to fit into a log-frame.	A world of complexity. Change is rarely linear and it is rarely possible to define most of what an intervention aims to achieve concretely, or even, which specific actions will be taken over a multi-year period.
<b>Who should participate?</b>	All key stakeholders. A highly participatory process is a necessity for a successful process and product.	All key stakeholders. A highly participatory process is a necessity for a successful process and product.