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Outcome Harvesting:
A Data-Driven, Human-Centered Approach to Evaluation

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Introduction

Today's complex public health challenges require dynamic solutions that often involve multiple interventions, programs, and decision-makers. For evaluators who seek to systematically understand if and how these solutions are meeting the needs of funders and the communities they serve, traditional methods of program monitoring and evaluation are not always feasible or useful. **Outcome harvesting** is an innovative, utilization-focused evaluation method that offers a valuable approach for evaluating complex interventions where the relationship between cause and effect is not clearly defined, where many components contribute to outcomes, or where an evaluation plan documenting anticipated outcomes driven by a theory of change was not determined prior to implementation. Outcome Harvesting can also be a potent tool for evaluating interventions focused on addressing the drivers of health that create upstream changes that can be difficult to measure using traditional evaluation methods such as randomized control trials.

Outcome harvesting was developed in 2002 by Ricardo Wilson-Grau and colleagues[1] to systematically record observed outcomes for monitoring and evaluation. In outcome harvesting, *outcomes* are changes in behaviors, actions, activities, relationships, policies,

> **Outcome Harvesting** is a customizable, highly participatory evaluation approach that allows evaluators to identify, verify, and interpret behavior change outcomes in contexts where relations of cause and effect are not fully understood or described a priori. Outcome harvesting can be useful to evaluate scenarios that focus on behavioral change, including evaluation of policies, advocacy efforts, communications campaigns, training programs, and interventions without a clearly delineated logic model.

or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or institution. Unlike evaluation methods that seek to understand progress toward predetermined benchmarks or goals, outcome harvesting uses a retrospective approach. *Outcome harvesters* collect evidence and information and then work backwards to determine how an intervention has shaped and contributed to outcomes. The harvest is a highly participatory process that incorporates the perspectives of a broad set of partners, including *harvest users, change agents, social actors,* and *independent actors*. Outcome harvests can answer questions about an intervention's effectiveness, relevance, and

sustainability, but are not as useful for understanding efficiency, progress, or performance. The outcome harvesting process is highly customizable and is particularly suited for on-going developmental, mid-term formative, and end-of term summative evaluations of social change interventions.[2] Evaluators can use this method alone to conduct formative or summative evaluation, or they can conduct an outcome harvest to complement other program monitoring and evaluation efforts. While conducting the full outcome harvesting process should be considered, the method can also be adapted, and components of outcome harvesting can used to supplement traditional evaluations to better understand the full impact of a complex effort.

Outcome Harvesting in Action

Though outcome harvesting originated in developmental evaluation, government agencies are increasingly using outcome harvesting for a broad variety of programs and policies that influence **changes in behavior** or address problems that are **new or intractable** with **novel or experimental approaches**.[1] *Figure 1 (on page 3)* describes an example of how Deloitte used outcome harvesting to understand the results of a national health reform initiative.

Outcome Harvest Participants

Change Agent: Individual or organization that influences an outcome.

Harvest User: The individual(s) who require the findings of the harvest to make decisions or act. One or more people within the change agent organization or third parties such as a donor. Often, our clients are the harvest user.

Independent Actor: Individuals who are knowledgeable about the outcomes and how they were achieved who can validate and enhance the credibility of the evaluation findings.

Outcome Harvester: Those responsible for managing the harvest.

Social Actor: Individual, group, community, organization, or institution that changes as a result of a change agent intervention.

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[1] Wilson-Grau, R. (2019). Outcome harvesting: Principles, steps, and evaluation applications. IAP.
[2] https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting

Figure 1. Example of Deloitte's Work on Outcome Harvesting

Deloitte's Outcome Harvest of an Overseas Health Reform Initiative

In 2024 and 2025, Deloitte led an outcome harvest of a 7-year, $100 million project that supported the implementation of a national health reform initiative. The Deloitte evaluation team conducted an outcome harvest to capture both the intended and unintended impact of this large-scale effort through the following steps:

1   **First,** Deloitte evaluators conducted an extensive desk review that incorporated project performance data, government data, health outcome data, and peer-reviewed research.

2   **Then,** the evaluators drafted the outcomes and engaged the project team for their review, incorporating their feedback and input to refine the outcomes.

3   **Lastly,** the evaluators engaged government partners and health system experts to triangulate the refined outcomes and confirm how the health reform initiative influenced primary health care.

The outcome harvest found that the health reform project successfully strengthened the transparency, accessibility, and affordability of care. The harvest also found that the project supported reforms that reduced the prevalence of informal payments (a form of corruption) in primary health care from 62% to 21%.

The applications of outcome harvesting extend beyond the healthcare sector. Figure 2 showcases other examples of interventions suitable for evaluation through outcome harvesting.

Figure 2. Example Use Cases for Outcome Harvesting

Capacity Building and Development

Outcome harvesting enables evaluators to discover how training participants have applied learned content, adopted new practices, reorganized processes and decision-making, and changed other behaviors. Evaluators can use outcome harvests to:

- Identify the impact of **public health fellowship programs** on fellows' career choices, trajectories, and a wide spectrum of professional and personal life decisions.
- Illuminate how physicians participating in **social determinants of health trainings** integrate learnings into practice, such as improving patient-provider communication, and developing referral networks that support patients' social needs.
- Understand how **community health worker infrastructure and training programs** influence patient health literacy, access to healthcare services, community engagement, and the local economy.

Policy and Communication

Outcome harvesting supports the evaluation of policies and communication campaigns, offering insight into how these initiatives have influenced behaviors in ways that are unanticipated or that go beyond immediate or short term outcomes. Policy makers and communications professionals can use outcome harvests to:

- Explain how **health communications campaigns** shape community members' attitudes and behaviors, policy initiatives, and community engagement.
- Reveal the influence of multi-component **maternal and child health policy initiatives in developing countries** on changes in mothers' health-related behaviors, improved infrastructure to support women and children, and community engagement in maternal and child health issues.
- Evaluate how **multi-country, multi-dimensional vaccination initiatives** influence immunization rates, disease awareness, and vaccination infrastructure.

Programs with Broad Discretionary Funding

Outcome harvesting offers a flexible approach to evaluating programs where grantees have discretion over how funds are applied, allowing funders to assess the broad net of influence across a diverse set of funding recipients' activities. Outcome harvest can be used to:

- Learn how social service grants or cooperative agreements with discretionary funding for state agencies result in increased capacity to deliver services, promising practices, and improved partnerships.
- Assess the effectiveness of emergency response grants in improving disaster preparedness and response capabilities at local hospitals.
- Evaluate the impacts of grants to school districts for mental health services on the integration of mental health programs with other services, changes in school staff and students' behavior and awareness of mental health, and overall influence on student well-being and education.

Deloitte's Human Centered Design Approach to Outcome Harvesting

Deloitte's approach to outcome harvesting incorporates our extensive **Human Centered Design (HCD)** capabilities to connect deeply with end-users and collaborators to work together to identify solutions and solve problems. HCD combines qualitative and quantitative research methods to develop a deep understanding of actors, processes, and systems and design strategies or solutions for improvement. Like outcome harvesting, HCD focuses on the experiences of people who receive or need programs and services— helping to examine problems from an end-user point of view. HCD strategies are often also useful in situations that have many interdependent or connecting factors

that contribute to the collective experience of an end-user, and thus products such as journey maps offer a user-generated understanding of an overall experience. While HCD is often used to reframe problems and create innovative solutions, the tenets of the HCD approach— including the use of divergent and convergent thinking processes, and the four modes of **discover**, **define**, **develop**, and **deliver**—align with and strengthen Deloitte's outcome harvesting process. Figure 3 displays Deloitte's six-step outcome harvesting framework, which is supported at its foundation by traditional outcome harvesting methods[3] and incorporates HCD principles in its design.

Figure 3. Deloitte's Approach to Outcome Harvesting Using Human-Centered Design[3]
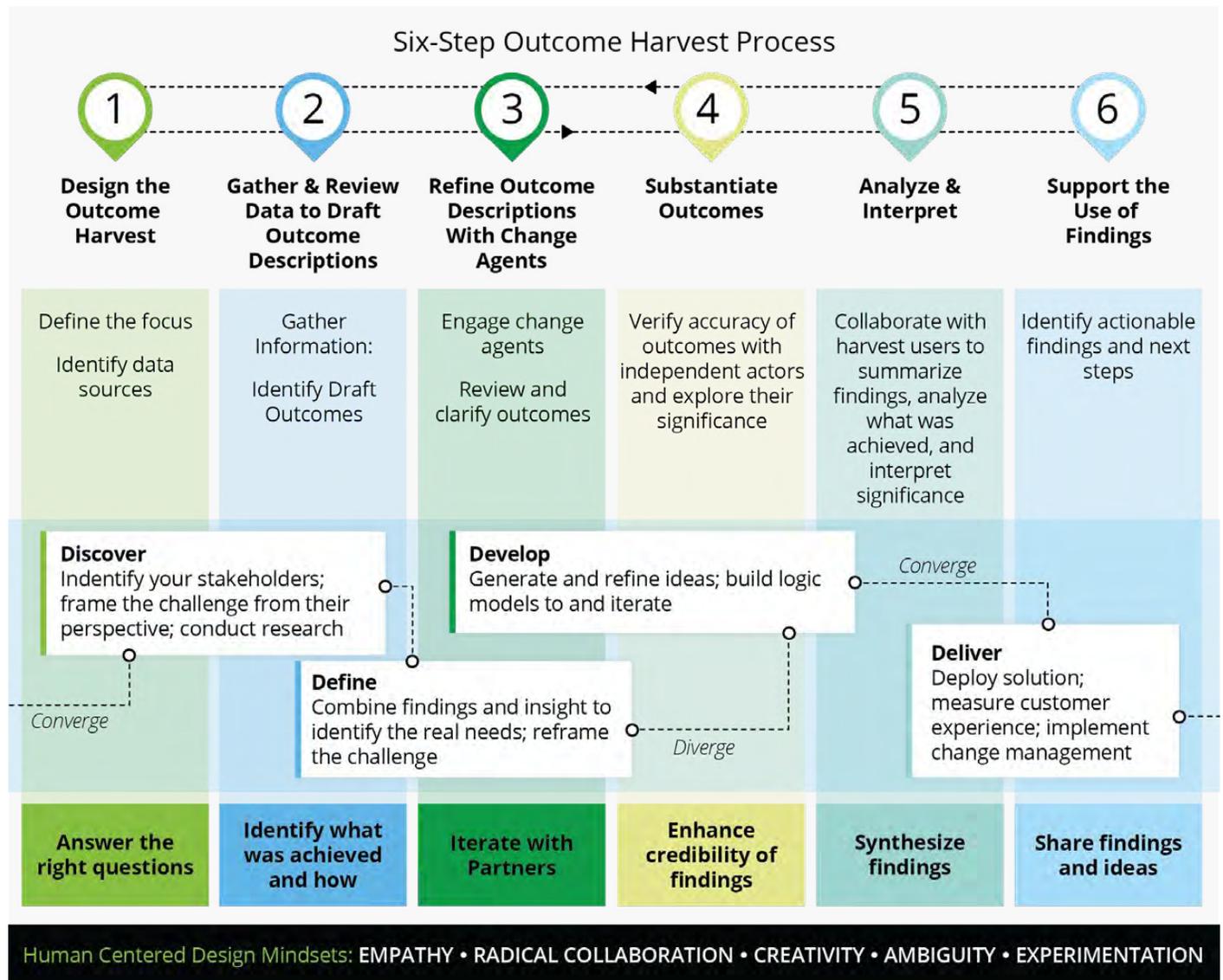
[3] Adapted From: Outcome Harvesting Brief, revised Nov 2013 (outcomemapping.ca)

During an outcome harvest, our team leads clients and their partners through a highly participatory, iterative, six step process to produce a set of outcomes and outcome descriptions that lead to actionable findings. **In Step 1,** our team uses Deloitte's HCD implementation methods such as **interest-holder mapping, concept brainstorming,** and **prioritization** to work with clients to converge on the design of the outcome harvest.

In Step 2, we use tools such as **environmental scans, document reviews, interviews,** and **focus groups** to identify and test ideas and draft outcomes. When appropriate, our Deloitte team also leverages tools such as Sprinklr to analyze social media to inform outcome descriptions and better understand social actors' perceptions about programs or interventions. We also employ Generative AI to support efficient document review and draft outcome descriptions.

In Step 3, our team engages with *change agents* to refine and elaborate on the draft outcome descriptions, using **surveys, interviews,** and **facilitated discussions.** This step produces a set of outcomes that are substantiated **in Step 4** with *independent actors* to verify the accuracy of the findings, explore their significance, and converge on a set of credible and plausible outcomes that will be useful to inform decision making. Our team uses **questionnaires, interviews,** and **review panels** to substantiate outcomes with participants. Once the outcomes are substantiated and validated, we work with our clients **in Step 5** to analyze and interpret the findings to identify the "so what" and answer the evaluation questions. **Sense-making sessions, data review sessions,** or **mind-mapping** can be useful during this step to develop the story of an intervention's achievements. At this stage, it can also be valuable to incorporate secondary data to further explore, interpret, and validate the outcomes identified in the harvest process. In our experience, bringing additional health, social and behavioral data from public datasets or proprietary sources like Deloitte's HealthPrismTM can complement the outcome harvest findings.

In the sixth and final step of the harvest, our team shares the findings via **reports** or **presentations** and

facilitates discussions with clients to determine next steps. Findings may be used to increase accountability to donors, inform partners of what was implemented and achieved, modify an intervention, plan future work, evaluate performance, or engage funders about new strategies.

Throughout this iterative, six-step process, our team applies the five **HCD Mindsets** described in Figure 4 *(on page 6)* to ensure that the outcome harvest keeps **people at the center** and considers their complex behaviors. This can improve the process and leads to useful findings that can guide decision making and action planning.

[3] Adapted From: Outcome Harvesting Brief, revised Nov 2013 (outcomemapping.ca)

Figure 4. Applying Human-Centered Design Mindsets to Outcome Harvesting

Empathy

Evaluators must understand harvest users, change agents, and social actors to identify the **types of questions** to ask that will result in useful findings. Approaching outcome harvests with empathy allows harvesters to connect with social actors and **learn how they have been affected by an intervention,** including in unanticipated or negative ways. This also supports the outcome harvesting principle of facilitating usefulness throughout the harvest.

Radical Collaboration

Harvest users are engaged throughout the six-step process to ensure that the harvest identifies **the full range of valid, credible, and useful outcome**s. Unlike traditional methods that rely on independent evaluators, a core principle of outcome harvesting is the **active participation of those being evaluated.**

Creativity

Outcome harvesting asks users to **think about evaluation in an innovative way,** working backward to consider unanticipated or negative outcomes.

Ambiguity

Outcome harvesting does not seek to identify outcomes solely attributed to an intervention. Instead, outcome harvesting considers the ways an intervention **contributes to direct and indirect changes** in behaviors, actions, activities, relationships, policies, or practices. The harvest process itself may be unpredictable if there is disagreement about the users, appropriate data sources, or uncertainty about what the outcomes will be. Harvesters **embrace this ambiguity**, collect the information, and dig deeper to validate the findings.

Experimentation

Outcome harvesting is **an iterative process** that allows harvesters the chance to develop a preliminary set of outcome descriptions that are then **vetted and refined** by harvest users and independent actors. During this process, draft outcomes may be eliminated, and new outcomes may be identified. This iterative process ensures that the final set of outcomes are substantiated, credible, and useful.

Learn More

Outcome harvesting is an inclusive, iterative process that puts people at the center and keeps partners engaged throughout to co-create valuable, deeply informed solutions or outcomes. If you are interested in learning more about how you can apply outcome harvesting and HCD to examine outcomes of policies, advocacy efforts, communications campaigns, training programs, or other interventions, our team would love to connect with you to learn more about your evaluation needs.

Contact

For questions, please feel free to reach out to:

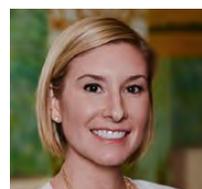**Lauren Toledo**
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