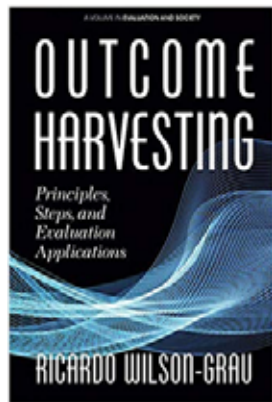


RESOURCE REVIEW

Outcome Harvesting Principles, Steps, and Evaluation Applications

Ricardo Wilson-Grau's book, *Outcome Harvesting: Principles, Steps, and Evaluation Applications*, describes what is arguably one of the most important evaluation methodologies to emerge in the field of social change and innovation in the last 20 years: Outcome Harvesting (OH).

There are two reasons to make this bold statement. The first is that OH is based on an important distinction between outcomes and impacts. While impacts refer to some desired end-state to which social innovators and their supporters aspire (e.g., reduced GHG emissions, increased high school graduation rates, higher income for rural farmers), outcomes are “a change in behaviour, relationships, actions, activities, policies, or practices of an individual, group, community, organization, or institution” required to realize that impact.



Here is a list of example of social change outcomes straight from the second page of the book:

- A government minister publicly declares that she will restrict untendered contracts to under 5% (an action).
- A civil society organization launches a campaign for governmental transparency (an activity).
- Two political parties join forces to collaborate rather than compete when proposing transparency legislation (relationship).
- A senior government official for the first time acknowledges the need for off-grid, sustainable energy production in rural areas (agenda).
- A legislature passes a new anti-corruption law (policy).
- A government implements norms and procedures for publishing all procurement records (practice).

All these examples reflect the simple idea that social change is the product of the relentless accumulation of actions (small, medium, and large) by diverse social actors towards some larger vision or objective.

As Barbara Klugman, an experienced evaluator from South Africa notes, this distinction between impact and outcomes has dramatic implications for evaluation, but also for the funding and management of social change efforts in general:

To ask a small advocacy group you have given funding for one, two, three years, or even four or five, to present you with the numbers of people who have benefitted is ridiculous when the change they're aiming to influence is about policy or attitudes of the public at large. What is meaningful is to know if and how their advocacy has influenced concrete, observable change in the behaviour – what they do, not what they receive – of individuals, communities and governments that represents progress towards development or social justice objectives. How have they influenced other organizations or key individuals to join in their effort to influence change? Have they influenced debates among policy makers? Have they influenced how the media engages the issues? Have they influenced a change in an approach to service provision? Outcome Harvesting provides the answers. (Wilson Grau, 2014, p. 7)

The second reason that OH is a significant addition to the field is that it is based on a no-nonsense understanding of how outcomes and impacts emerge. While many social innovators may be guided or informed by elegant logic models which rely on linear cause-and-effect theories of change, their change efforts are typically characterized by the following:

- Strategies that emerge and adapt in unpredictable ways over time.
- Efforts that involve multiple, distributed, and often conflicting actors, each working within their own sphere of influence.
- Interventions into complex systems, where the number and variety of interacting variables make traditional assessments of cause and effect infeasible (e.g., being definitive about how an outcome might be attributed to a discrete intervention by a social actor).

The retrospective nature of OH, where evaluators and innovators identify and make sense of outcomes after they emerge, coupled with the methodology's emphasis on trying to assess the contribution – rather than attribution – of various social actors to those outcomes, elegantly deals with two challenges that typically defeat traditional evaluators who find themselves tasked with evaluating social change efforts.

It is around ideas such as these that Ricardo Wilson-Grau, one of the most seasoned evaluators in the world, has developed, tested, and refined the OH approach. After an introductory chapter that describes some of the conceptual and professional foundations of OH, Ricardo carefully walks through the six steps of OH:

1. Design the Outcome Harvest with the primary users of the evaluation, in an effort to clarify their most important evaluation questions, as well as the information to be collected to answer those questions, and by whom, when, and how.

2. Review documentation on the interventions (e.g., reports, memos, media) to identify and formulate draft outcome statements.
3. Engage sources with the most knowledge of the intervention and what it has achieved to test and refine outcome statements.
4. Substantiate select outcome statements with external sources knowledgeable about the change, but independent from the intervention or organization, to ensure accuracy and/or deepen understanding of the outcome.
5. Analyze and interpret outcome statements by themes and drawing upon the pattern of evidence to answer evaluation questions, usually in the form of an evaluation report.
6. Support the use of findings by engaging the evaluation users in reviewing and working with the evaluation report.

In the last two chapters, Ricardo describes the nine principles that provide evaluators and innovators with extra guidance on how to adapt OH to widely different contexts. Five principles relate to the process of OH (e.g., “The methodology should be learned experientially,” “Nurture appropriate participation”) and four focus on the content of OH findings (e.g., “Establish a plausible influence between intervention and outcome,” “Ensure credible-enough evidence”). Ricardo provides a table to describe how each principle can be applied in each of the six steps.

While the steps and principles provide a solid structure for the methodology, countless tips and examples make them all the easier to put into practice. These include a description of the different roles evaluators can adopt in the OH (e.g., facilitator, coach, and mentor), the iterative and cooperative process of formulating good outcome statements with social change makers (aka ping-ponging), and easy-to-understand templates for developing a term of reference, budgeting for an OH, and an OH report.

The product of an Outcome Harvest is impressive. OH reports always include a series of outcome statements (running into the hundreds for large international development projects) that answer three questions:

- What was the outcome (e.g., action, behaviour change)?
- Why is the outcome significant?
- What was the contribution to the outcome?

Answering all three questions is important. Imagine a public declaration of support for family planning program for young girls by a faith leader. Its significance may be unclear to a general reader, until social actors point out that that same faith leader has been a strong opponent of such programs in the past. His or her views softened thanks to countless hours of respectful conversation and debate with program advocates who adopted a “relational” model of advocacy. It is often these little victories that create the conditions for larger, tipping-point social changes down the road.

Once outcome statements are produced, they are classified into different thematic areas or objectives (e.g., influencing public opinion). Sometimes they are summarized visually in a histogram to show when they emerged and how they are related to each other, and always in a way that allows evaluators and innovators to answer more easily the evaluation questions the OH is intended to answer. (To see what an OH report looks like, peek at The World Bank report, Cases in Outcome Harvesting, 2014).

Resource Reviews are a series of documents exploring new frameworks, tools and resources for building communities and solving tough challenges. This particular document was developed in cooperation with Tamarack Institute as part of its efforts to build capacity for community change makers.



<http://here2there.ca/>



<http://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/>

While the book does not include a detailed critique of OH, Ricardo is up-front about some of the methodology’s more difficult aspects. Here are a few: getting social innovators to identify and elaborate on negative outcomes (endemic to any social change efforts); the need to embrace the mix of qualitative and quantitative data (essential to OH); and the tricky issue of whether to include the evaluator’s own recommendations as part of the assessment.

There are no easy resolutions to any of the challenges he lays out. Still, they are more navigable thanks to his effort to normalize them and explain how he has addressed in them in the past.

It is difficult to write a good evaluation methods book. It is even more difficult to write an evaluation methods book as good as this one. Ricardo’s hard-won experience, practical mastery of the subject matter, and first-rate writing skills enabled him to put together a resource that sets a high bar for the field.

Learn More

Ricardo Wilson-Grau. 2018. Outcome Harvesting: Principles, Steps, and Evaluation Applications. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

The World Bank (2014). Cases in Outcome Harvesting: Ten pilot experiences identify new learning from multi-stakeholder projects to improve results. Retrieved from <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/419021468330946583/Cases-in-outcome-harvesting-ten-pilot-experiences-identify-new-learning-from-multi-stakeholder-projects-to-improve-results>