SMART PEACE

OUTCOME HARVESTING FOR ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING IN THE SMART PEACE CONSORTIUM

August 2021

MEL Practice Paper 2

About Smart Peace

Smart Peace is a four-year programme funded by UK Aid for strategic conflict resolution in fragile and conflict-affected regions. It is implemented by a specialist global consortium comprising Conciliation Resources as the consortium lead, The Asia Foundation, the Behavioural Insights Team, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zürich, Chatham House and International Crisis Group. The Smart Peace consortium combines expertise in conflict analysis, community dialogue, political-level mediation, evaluation, policy influence and behavioural science to deliver targeted and adaptive conflict resolution interventions in Central African Republic, Myanmar and Nigeria.

The combination of diverse methodologies and approaches used across Smart Peace requires a diverse range of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) tools. This paper is the second in a series of short practice papers introducing the various MEL methods utilised in Smart Peace: peer review, outcome harvesting, SenseMaker and strategy testing.

Author: Yahoska Berríos

The Smart Peace consortium combines expertise in conflict analysis, research, community dialogue, political-level mediation and policy influence. These diverse approaches require a similarly diverse range of monitoring and evaluation methodologies and tools that enable each partner to use the most appropriate method to monitor and evaluate their work. This is key to ensuring the collaborative learning and adaptive nature of the consortium.

Conciliation Resources has developed an adapted version of the Outcome Harvesting methodology to support the Smart Peace consortium to systematically monitor and 'harvest' results on an ongoing basis. This practice paper explains in detail the process and logic of the Outcome Harvesting methodology and its suitability for peacebuilding work. Furthermore, the paper outlines how Conciliation Resources has adapted the methodology for a consortium setting and what the Outcome Harvesting process looks like in practice.

About Outcome Harvesting

Outcome Harvesting is a monitoring and evaluation approach designed for programmes which experience constant change, and contend with unexpected and unforeseeable actors and factors in their programming environment.[1] In this structured approach, 'harvesters' identify, formulate, verify, analyse and interpret 'outcomes' of interventions in contexts where relations of cause and effect are not linear and attribution cannot be easily defined as there are multiple actors influencing change.

Outcome Harvesting brings together elements of 'outcome mapping' – which looks at changes in behaviour – and 'utilisation-focused evaluation', which aims to make evaluations as useful as possible for the intended users. Outcome Harvesting collects evidence of what has changed (outcomes) and then works backwards to determine whether and how an intervention has contributed to these changes.

Unlike some evaluation approaches, Outcome Harvesting does not limit itself to measuring progress towards rigid logframes or predetermined indicators. Outcome Harvesting is flexible, and it

1. Wilson-Grau, R. *Outcome Harvesting: Principles, Steps, and Evaluation Applications* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2018)

Key definitions

What is an outcome?

An outcome is an observable change in the behaviour of individuals, groups, communities, organisations or institutions. They are actions, activities, relationships, agendas, policies and practices of one or more societal actors influenced by an intervention.

Who is the harvester?

A harvester is the person or group of people responsible for periodically and systematically collecting information about changes observed as a result of the intervention.

Who are the intended users?

Those who need the findings in order to make decisions or take actions.

What are the intended uses?

The decisions and actions that the Outcome Harvesting process will serve – for adapting programming, monitoring and evaluation, reporting, learning or advocacy.

What does it mean to harvest outcomes?

Harvesting outcomes is the identification, formulation, analysis and interpretation of outcomes to provide the needed information for the intended uses.[2]

Outcome Harvesting collects evidence of what has changed (outcomes) and then works backwards to determine whether and how an intervention has contributed to these changes.

captures information on all relevant outcomes in the conflict. The outcomes can be positive or negative, intended or unintended, direct or indirect, as long as the connection between the intervention and the outcomes is reasonable, meaning that the consortium activities have at least a minimum level of influence on the observed change.

Outcome Harvesting within the Smart Peace consortium

The Smart Peace consortium requires monitoring and evaluation approaches which are collegial, dynamic, flexible, user orientated and straightforward. They need to be applicable to ever-changing contexts in which direct data collection can sometimes be a challenge; they need to be simple so that all partners can engage with them; and they need to support interpretation and analysis while being robust enough to produce high-quality learning outputs.

Outcome Harvesting is especially beneficial to the consortium approach as it maintains the theory of change as a live document, fosters reflection on how collaboration and all the different strands of the consortium's work joins together and enables a shared understanding of the intervention's progress and results.

For the Smart Peace consortium, we used Outcome Harvesting to:

- review observed changes across the whole programme
- monitor progress against the overarching theory of change
- reflect on our adaptive and collaborative model and practice
- question and analyse the programme's contribution to the observed changes
- collectively reflect on what has worked well and what hasn't in order to bring about the observed changes
- identify key lessons learned and evidence of the successes and/or failures of our innovative practices

Outcome Harvesting wasn't originally designed to monitor and evaluate consortium programmes. This has brought some challenges to applying it to a consortium, including: (i) lack of consistent training on Outcome Harvesting across all members of the consortium, and (ii) diversity of styles in reporting and data collection, which makes it more difficult to record changes in a consistent way. That has meant that we have had to adapt the way in which we implement Outcome Harvesting to account for these different circumstances whilst at the same time maintain the methodology's core principles and foundations.

2.   Wilson-Grau, R. and Heather Britt. *Outcome Harvesting* (Ford Foundation, 2012)

The Outcome Harvesting principles

Outcome Harvesting principles underpin the entire process and are imperative when adapting the methodology. They include:

Harvesting social change outcomes: Social change in Outcome Harvesting is defined as societal actors modifying the way they do things in new and significant ways (outcome) that the intervention plausibly influenced (contribution).

Formulating an outcome as an observable change: To qualify as an outcome, an individual, community, organisation or institution must have done something differently and this needs to be framed as an action. However, a non-action can also be an outcome, when influencing a social actor not to act prevents something undesirable from happening.

Establishing plausible influence of the intervention: To qualify as an intervention outcome, there has to be a reasonable relationship of the cause and effect or influence between the outcome and the intervention's activities or outputs.

Ensuring credible-enough outcomes: Apply evaluative thinking to ensure that the Outcome Harvesting exercise is as trustworthy as necessary so the results are plausible and useful.[3]

How did Smart Peace incorporate the Outcome Harvesting principles?

Principle 1: Harvest social change outcomes

The consortium management team, who play the central coordination role in the consortium, were trained in Outcome Harvesting, including how to identify social change outcomes and how to write outcome statements. As the consortium management team are responsible for reviewing all reporting documentation and data sources throughout the year, they identify social change outcomes that meet the Outcome Harvesting requirements. When details are missing, or if in doubt whether the outcome is a social change, outcomes are discussed with those colleagues who reported them. The consortium management team gather all the necessary information in order to comply with the Outcome Harvesting format.

Once outcomes are drafted, all consortium partners review the outcome statements, provide feedback and add background information. This ensures that we are able to capture all the key information to determine the significance of the outcomes and the contribution not only of the programme but also of external actors.

In addition, consortium colleagues leading work in different Smart Peace contexts are invited to an analysis workshop and, when analysing outcomes of a peer hub, they act as critical friends, which includes challenging whether described outcomes can be regarded as social change or not.

Principle 2: Formulate an outcome as an observable change

Outcomes are described in three parts:

- First, the description of the action (who did something differently, when and where).

- Second, an analysis of how the change is significant to both the context analysis and the objectives of the intervention.

- Third, the contribution that the programme made to the change, as well as identifying other contributing factors. Each outcome is analysed and framed in relation to changes in the conflict dynamics.

A gender lens is applied to the formulation of each outcome to uncover different, gendered aspects and experiences of exclusion, and to generate ideas about how project activities cater to the specific needs of diverse groups in the conflicts. Interrogating each outcome from a gender and inclusion perspective means asking direct questions about who is impacted by the observed changes, who may be hidden actors contributing to the outcomes, and for whom is the outcome most significant. This allows us to carry out a comprehensive gender and inclusion analysis of the outcomes.

3. Wilson-Grau, R. *Outcome Harvesting: Principles, Steps, and Evaluation Applications*

Key benefits

- Outcome Harvesting is useful for **capturing and summarising intangible changes** that are inherently difficult to measure, in a clear and succinct way.

- It embeds conflict analysis and **gender sensitivity**.

- It **defines our contribution clearly** while recognising the contribution of other actors.

- It focuses on both **positive and negative changes** to provide a richer analysis of results.

- It fosters **collaboration**.

- It enables project **adaptability**.

- It places an emphasis on **effectiveness** rather than performance.

- It **builds trust** and consensus among workshop participants.

- It is **cost effective** and serves as a key mechanism to ensure value for money.

Outcome Harvesting creates a vital quality assurance mechanism not only for reporting but also for future programme adaptations.

Principle 3: Establish plausible influence of the intervention

All relevant consortium members and selected critical friends meet once a year for an Outcome Harvesting Analysis Workshop (OHAW) to analyse the outcomes harvested throughout the year. The analysis workshop is facilitated by an MEL specialist team and interrogates whether and how consortium activities (e.g. workshops, publications, advocacy work, etc.) had an influence on or contributed, either fully or partially, to social changes observed by the project. The workshop also explores the contribution of external actors, which can include efforts made by other peacebuilding organisations, civil society organisations, politicians, global advocacy agendas, etc. This process allows the facilitator and critical friends to challenge the implementation team to justify whether an attribution link is legitimate and to ensure that the project is not claiming unreasonable attribution.

Principle 4: Ensure credible-enough outcomes

During the analysis workshop, participants are encouraged by the facilitator to apply evaluative thinking (an inquisitive process which involves identifying assumptions, and posing thoughtful and often challenging questions to pursue deeper understanding) to reflect and analyse each other's perspectives on the level of significance of the outcomes, and to use these insights to verify or challenge previously established assumptions within the theory of change. By using their experience and expertise, the critical friends provide constructive feedback, raise questions and offer innovative suggestions.
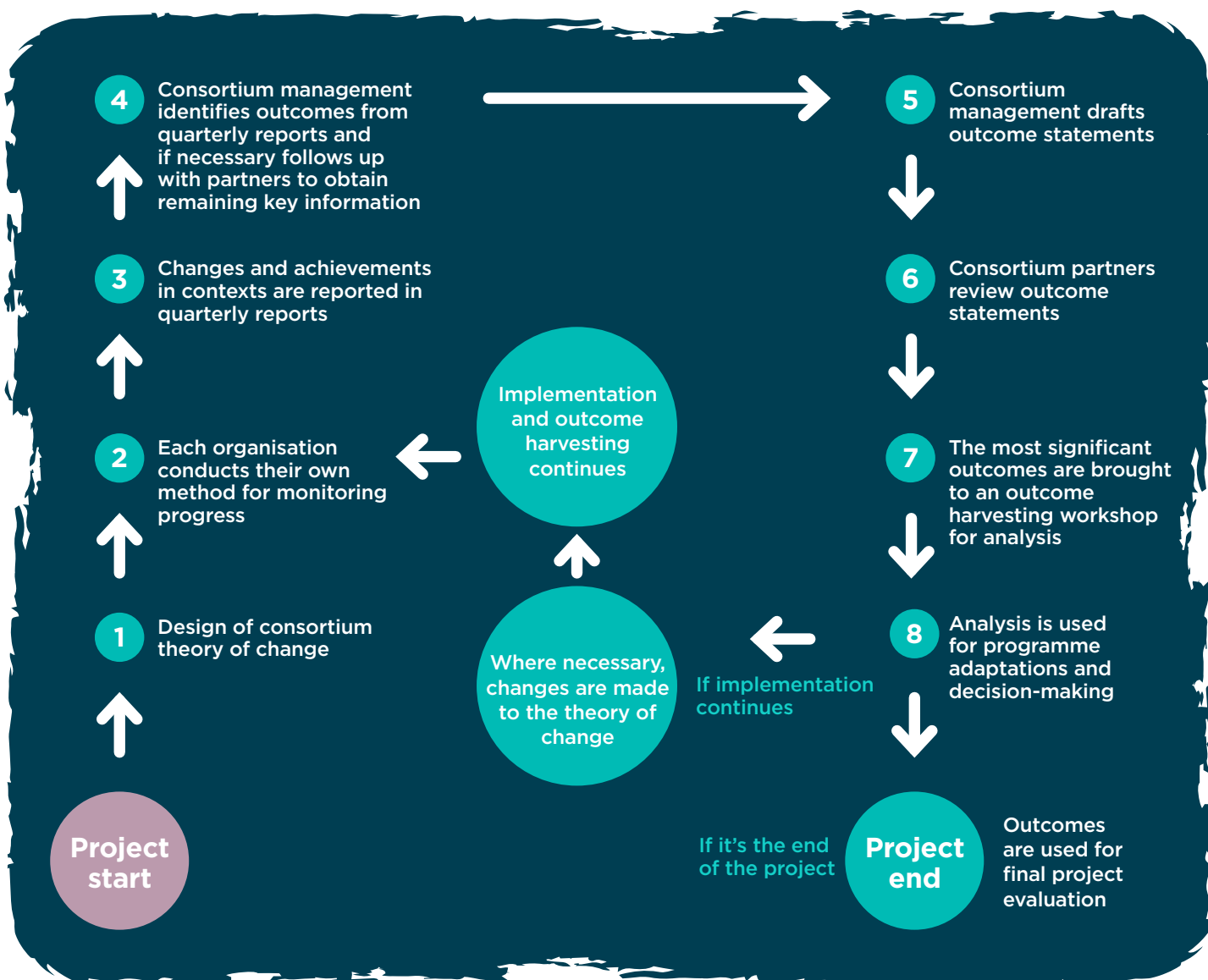
Outcome Harvesting value for money

In contrast to most MEL methodologies, which are often criticised for being too linear and for not being able to capture the complexity of peacebuilding work (even less so when peacebuilding is conducted in an adaptive way), Outcome Harvesting embraces complexity and uses systemic thinking to better understand, respond to and measure peacebuilding work at all levels.

Outcome Harvesting maximises value for money by using collective and peer knowledge to analyse and validate changes, benefiting from divergent perspectives which lead to questions that may have been overlooked. When necessary, the facilitator and/or critical friends use their wide experience to compare evidence from similar conflicts where peacebuilding strategies have been different, in order to identify assumptions about the drivers of the change and bring out lessons which can support wider peacebuilding.

Outcome Harvesting works backwards (from the evidence to the theory) and provides explicit, clear and realistic analysis of how changes that have already happened contributed to the intervention logic and theory of change. Through the collegial and interrogative nature of the analysis workshop, Outcome Harvesting creates a vital quality assurance mechanism not only for reporting but also for future programme adaptations.

Outcome Harvesting is cost effective as it utilises a digital platform (rather than in-person) which enables equal representation of all participants whilst reducing time and travel costs.

Graphic 1: Outcome Harvesting step-by-step

4 Consortium management identifies outcomes from quarterly reports and if necessary follows up with partners to obtain remaining key information

5 Consortium management drafts outcome statements

3 Changes and achievements in contexts are reported in quarterly reports

6 Consortium partners review outcome statements

Implementation and outcome harvesting continues

2 Each organisation conducts their own method for monitoring progress

7 The most significant outcomes are brought to an outcome harvesting workshop for analysis

1 Design of consortium theory of change

Where necessary, changes are made to the theory of change

If implementation continues

8 Analysis is used for programme adaptations and decision-making

Project start

If it's the end of the project

Project end

Outcomes are used for final project evaluation

Examples of Outcome Harvesting questions

• Have peacebuilding structures been able to address issues of people from all identities?

• Are X groups acting differently as a result of their engagement in peacebuilding training?

• Are X groups engaging with local governments? If so, how was this facilitated by the programme?

Outcome Harvesting in practice

Step 1: Design the harvest

The design of the harvest means defining what the intended uses of the outcome harvesting process will be. It includes formulating questions that the Outcome Harvesting process will respond to as well as identifying the intended users of the analysis. The Outcome Harvesting questions are formulated based on the programme's theory of change. This should be done at the inception phase of a project, once an initial theory of change has been designed.

Step 2: Gather data and draft outcomes

The harvester identifies and formulates outcome statements, which usually takes about 15 minutes when done regularly throughout the project year, e.g. after quarterly narrative reporting. Collecting outcomes regularly doesn't require any complicated tools (a simple table or Excel sheet is sufficient); however, the key is to get into the habit of regular data gathering, as collecting data only once a year prior to the analysis workshop increases the risk of information being lost or misrepresented.

Each outcome statement comprises of: (i) changes in individuals, groups, communities, organisations or institutions; (ii) how the intervention plausibly influenced them, and (iii) why the outcome is significant in relation to the context.

Example of outcome statement

Two former government members from country X made conciliatory public statements through media interviews, arguing for restraint and resumption of dialogue during a very fierce and hostile environment following skirmishes between countries X and Y. *[description of change observed]*
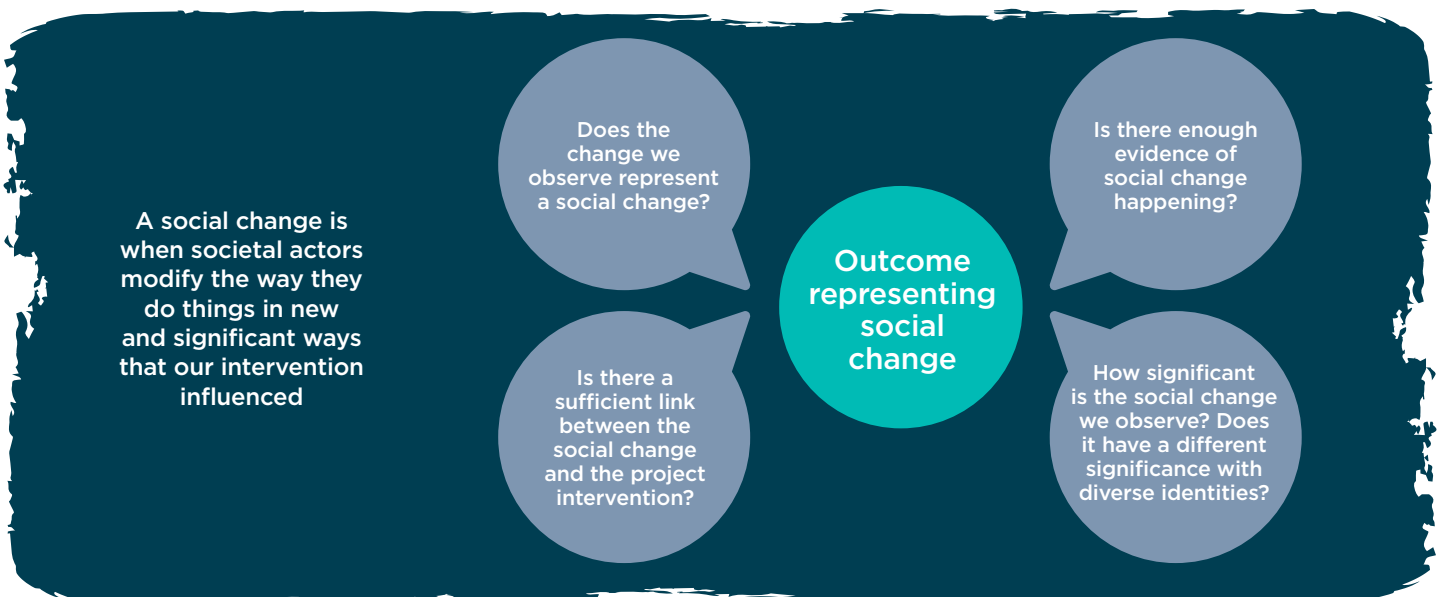
This is highly significant as it was a call for peaceful actions at a time of rising hostilities between the two countries, when not that many influential people took a public stance for peace and diffusing tensions. Furthermore, these two individuals have held significant positions within the current government body, which makes their public positions even more important. *[description of significance]*

These individuals have been engaged in the dialogue process that our intervention has established for some time. In addition, the programme partners have had regular discussions with them leading up to these positions being publicly shared. *[description of contribution]*

Step 3: Review and support

The outcome statements are reviewed by consortium partners to ensure they provide all the required information. At this stage, an MEL specialist, who typically facilitates the analysis workshop, reviews that the outcomes fulfil all key principles previously mentioned, especially checking whether the outcomes represent a social change which can be evidenced or verified and whether there is a link between the change and the intervention.

Graphic 2: Key questions to ask when collecting or reviewing outcomes

A social change is when societal actors modify the way they do things in new and significant ways that our intervention influenced

Does the change we observe represent a social change?

Is there enough evidence of social change happening?

Is there a sufficient link between the social change and the project intervention?

Outcome representing social change

How significant is the social change we observe? Does it have a different significance with diverse identities?

Step 4: Outcome Harvesting Analysis Workshop (OHAW)

Analysis and interpretation of the outcomes is done at an annual Outcome Harvesting Analysis Workshop (OHAW) which is held online. This space is used to critically reflect on observed outcomes; use evaluative thinking to challenge assumptions on the contribution and significance of outcome statements; assess the relative effectiveness of the intervention based on the outcomes; draw on key lessons from implementation; and, when necessary, adapt the programme to build on and/or replicate positive outcomes.

Critical friends (internal or external) are invited to take part in the OHAW. This includes programme implementation members from different teams, as well as gender, policy or research specialists.

Results of the analysis are then captured in an OHAW report produced by the facilitator, following feedback by all OHAW participants and other key members of the consortium. The report includes key information on the latest context changes, details of the analysis of each outcome, overall assessment of the progress against the theory of change, key lessons learned and agreed actions. It can be utilised for donor reporting, internal strategising and further activity planning. As such, it's best to plan the annual analysis workshop ahead of key reporting milestones.

Step 5: Using the findings and process learning

The findings and outcomes produced through the Outcome Harvesting process are used for:

• Testing theory of change and strategies

• Making informed decisions for adaptive management

• Developing learning outputs

• Reporting

• Evaluation

• Accountability

• Advocacy

SMART PEACE

The Asia Foundation

THE BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS TEAM

CHATHAM HOUSE
The Royal Institute of International Affairs

CONCILIATION RESOURCES

INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

CSS
ETH Zürich

hd Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue
Mediation for peace