



Employing Outcome Harvest Studies in Business Environment Reform (BER) and Market Systems Development (MSD) Programmes

Practitioner Tips from DevLearn and the Canopy Lab

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Background

DevLearn and the Canopy Lab have jointly developed this guidance note to share learnings on Outcome Harvesting (OH) studies for BER and MSD programmes. The aim of the note is to share insights from our experience designing, contracting and implementing such studies, drawing lessons from a specific study undertaken in 2021.

DevLearn is a consultancy that provides M&E support to the Essor Programme, which forms part of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office's (FCDO's) Private Sector Development (PSD) portfolio in the DRC. The Canopy Lab is a consulting firm that provides Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) advisory services to FCDO's PSD portfolio in the DRC and was contracted to conduct this Outcome Harvest Study.

The Essor Programme is a GBP 35M flexible facility, implemented by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) as the FCDO's delivery partner, that aims to improve the business environment in the country. The programme started in January 2015 and will end in January 2022. One of the Programme's workstreams supports Business Environment Reform (BER), which is helping to formalise the economy, reduce corruption and facilitate access to credit through government reforms. In 2021, Canopy Lab undertook an OH study of this workstream.¹

OH purpose and methodology

OH methodology is useful in systems change programs, where change processes are complex, difficult to anticipate and shaped by a variety of influences. It can help identify results beyond those anticipated by a programme's M&E system, both favorable and unfavorable to the intended trajectory of change promoted by a programme. The methodology can also be used to explore additional avenues of investigation such

¹ The evaluation report can be accessed at www.en.essorrdc.com/home-2/publications

as how changes have been experienced by different stakeholders and influences on the sustainability of outcomes.

An OH study first explores changes (outcomes) within a given landscape and timeframe. Researchers rely largely on insights from a combination of informants internal and external to the programme. The study then, in a second phase, substantiates and delves into the details of these changes while investigating what actors were attributable for this change. In this second phase, researchers rely on insights from a completely different set of informants, largely stakeholders and members of the market system under evaluation.

For general information on OH for BER and MSD programmes, we recommend the following sources:

- Wilson-Grau, R and Britt, H (2012) "[Outcome Harvesting](#)" Ford Foundation
- Leveraging Economic Opportunities (LEO) Report #43, (2016) "[Testing Tools for Assessing Systemic Change: Outcome Harvesting](#)"

Tips for a successful evaluation

1. Clearly define a manageable outcome space for exploration

As noted above, OH explores changes across the landscape of a system that a programme expects to influence. To effectively guide OH researchers, the outcome space should be clearly defined within this zone of influence. A programme's theory of change and results framework, for example, are useful tools for characterizing the zone. However, an OH can lose the opportunity to capture information about unexpected changes if it is too narrowly constrained to test solely whether a programme has achieved the expected results in the programme's theory of change. Framing the inquiry in terms of a programme's intervention theme, like the widespread adoption of a given business model or reform of a specific aspect of a country's regulatory framework, can help keep the scope wide while remaining practical and relevant.

To help define the scope of the OH study during the inception phase, OH researchers can start by working with programme staff to review and update theories of change and results frameworks and afterwards explicitly define the outcome space to be studied. Obviously, they should take into consideration the time and resources available for the study. They should also focus on individual programme interventions with a strong likelihood of any resulting outcomes – in other words, interventions that are sufficiently mature to have produced detectable outcomes. A useful scope should avoid outcome spaces where interventions are too new to generate change, or at best mix these investigations with inquiries into outcome spaces where the results are likely to be more substantial.

The Essor Programme consists of a large variety of interventions implemented over a long period of time. Defining the scope of the OH study therefore proved challenging. The study only included four interventions with four different external partners. However, given the time-intensive nature of the exercise, it may have been more useful to investigate a broad number of changes related to a smaller number of interventions.

2. Consider making the OH study a joint learning exercise with the programme

OH studies are not suitable as independent or accountability-focused evaluations. Instead, they are excellent opportunities to learn about what is changing, what is not changing and what implications these changes have for programme strategies. It can therefore be useful to conduct OH as a joint, co-creative effort between the programme implementer teams and researchers, meaning the programme team is involved in designing the study, collecting data and interpreting findings. The advantages of a joint exercise are:

- Creating a greater understanding amongst the study team of the possible outcome space to explore;
- Greater credibility and rapport with and, thereby access to, external informants;
- Greater insights into possible informants who can contribute to substantiating and investigating the influences of identified outcomes;
- Speedier adaptation to new information such as adjusting the scope of the study;
- Greater appreciation for the study's findings by the programme implementer and their implications for programme strategies. A joint exercise is more likely to have greater buy-in with the programme implementer, reducing the risk that findings that challenge assumptions or expectations will be poorly received.

It is also useful to consider the timing of interviews with the programme implementer and external partners. For programmes that are complex, hard to understand and not entirely transparent, we recommend holding the initial harvest with the programme implementer and the substantiation phase with programme partners afterwards. Because of the exceedingly high level of technical complexity of the Essor programme, Canopy Lab held the initial harvest with the programme implementer, which proved invaluable for the study quality and feasibility.

If time had allowed for another OH study to have been conducted, we would have considered the option of making the study a joint internal exercise. This would have been especially useful in overcoming the challenge of finding interviewers with sufficient subject matter knowledge, overcoming language barriers and building trust/credibility with respondents.

3. Allocate time and resources for an iterative study

The substantiation phase of an OH study involves a relatively creative process of identifying and interviewing key informants who can help verify (or substantiate) the outcome reports detected in the initial scan. Substantiation often uncovers new outcomes and additional detail that may require additional substantiation – or more in-depth investigation – to make sense of what is happening and the influences driving or constraining change. This leads to a more dynamic, non-linear research process than other qualitative methodologies.

OH works well when performed in successive rounds over an extended period of time, as the research team uses newly discovered insights to dig progressively deeper into the circumstances around a given outcome. Research teams should look for new opportunities to capture relevant details but be careful to avoid “falling into a rabbit hole.” It can be useful to cultivate relationships with key informants at partner agencies that can be called upon during successive OH rounds.

4. Ensure individuals collecting data have exceptional interviewing skills

OH requires a higher calibre of interview skills than other evaluation types. Interviewers need to pose broad questions to explore possible outcomes, then probe more narrowly into the details and influences behind outcomes. Interviewers also often need to recognize and pivot questions to explore emergent themes as they arise, but also conduct a thorough interview and not lose focus. Interviewers must also have at least an adequate understanding of the subject matter and it is enormously helpful if they already have contacts in key respondent groups/organizations.

For the Essor OH study, the research team found it challenging during interviews to translate broad and rather abstract questions into concrete questions that were meaningful to respondents. Programme partners were typically focused on operational challenges in their individual projects and not on issues relating to shifts in the overall operating context and trajectories of change. Bridging this gap required advanced qualitative interviewing skills.

5. Do the study on-the-ground and include strong local researchers in the evaluation team.

OH interviews are best conducted by host country nationals with deep professional networks. For reasons already explained in this note, interviews are complex, are best done by those with a thorough understanding of the context and who have established networks on the ground. Because of the iterative nature of OH, interviewers may also need to touch base again with respondents at a later point in time. Such access and respondent cooperation can be difficult to secure remotely.

The Essor OH study included local researchers at the onset, but the local research team members were not able to participate in the full course of the data collection stage. Canopy Lab responded by switching to entirely remote data collection methods. In retrospect, Canopy Lab would have identified alternative local researchers to maintain a local presence in the DRC until the end of the study rather than proceed with an entirely remote approach.

About us

DevLearn is a UK based consulting firm specialising in implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and communications for inclusive economic growth. You can learn more about us at www.devlearn.co.uk.

The Canopy Lab is US-based consulting firm with experience steering transformative change initiatives. We specialize in the practical application of systems thinking, helping clients work smarter to solve complex problems in a variety of sectors. Find us at www.thecanopylab.com

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